

BIROn - Birkbeck Institutional Research Online

Enabling Open Access to Birkbeck's Research Degree output

Impossible telling and the epistolary form: contemporary poetry, mourning and trauma

<https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/id/eprint/45932/>

Version: Full Version

Citation: Lock, Frances Janice (2020) Impossible telling and the epistolary form: contemporary poetry, mourning and trauma. [Thesis] (Unpublished)

© 2020 The Author(s)

All material available through BIROn is protected by intellectual property law, including copyright law.

Any use made of the contents should comply with the relevant law.

[Deposit Guide](#)
Contact: [email](#)

caoin, narrowcasting, halting sites:

Works of epistolary grieving

Volume 1

Fran Lock

Birkbeck College, University of London

A selection of poems submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English Literature and
Contemporary Poetry

2019

Word count 38,173

DECLARATION

I declare that this work is the result of my own original and independent research, except where otherwise stated; due acknowledgement has been made in the text to material cited. This dissertation has not been previously submitted for any degree at any university.

ABSTRACT

This thesis constitutes a practice-based autoethnographic intervention into knowledge, initiated by and emerging from my own experience of letter writing as both therapeutic strategy and poetic practice. My critical enquiry is driven by two book-length collections of poetry – *narrowcasting*, and *halting sites* – alongside the process-led performance poem – *caoin*. These several writing projects were provoked by the death by suicide of my oldest and closest friend, and by my subsequent enrolment in various therapeutic and psychoanalytic programs designed to treat the trauma of sudden and shocking bereavement. The poems are necessarily concerned, therefore, with uncovering the aesthetic disposition of a poetics of grief, which I contend is entirely different from a poetics of mourning, although the two terms have often been treated as synonymous by the existing literature.¹

¹ For example in Peter Sacks, *The English Elegy* (John Hopkins University Press, 1987), Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* (University of Chicago Press, 1994), and Diana Fuss, *Dying Modern: A Meditation on Elegy* (Duke, 2013).

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	5
INTRODUCTION TO THE POEMS.....	7
<i>CAOIN</i>	16
SELECTED POEMS FROM <i>NARROWCASTING</i>	56
<i>HALTING SITES</i>	109
<i>NOR HOME IS HOME</i>	150
<i>IF NOT OF MEMORY</i>	160
NOTES ON TRAUMA AND IDENTITY IN THE TEXT.....	165
SOME FEATURES OF THE TEXT – <i>NARROWCASTING</i> / <i>CAOIN</i>	169
SOME FEATURES OF THE TEXT – <i>HALTING SITES</i>	189

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am indebted to my supervisors, Dr. Peter Fifield and Dr. Steve Willey, for their expertise, guidance and patience throughout the writing of this thesis, and for broadening the scope of my research in ways I never imagined possible. I would also like to give special thanks to Dr. Julia Bell for her clear-sighted encouragement during some particularly difficult moments, encouragement which served to reinvigorate my militancy and commitment to my research, and to preserve my belief in myself as a researcher. I offer my heartfelt thanks to the Tribe, and to the Clan, particularly to my brother, for patiently listening to drafts of poems and conference papers, and for his stalwart work in pit bull minding. Above all, my thanks to Martyn, to whom this thesis is dedicated.

IMPORTANT NOTE

These poems are also archived digitally at: <https://dog-sealion-43cn.squarespace.com/> alongside the reflective research journals that underpin them. In order to navigate through the text with ease, to see the paratextual materials that were repurposed in *halting sites*, and to see the *hating sites* images in colour, I recommend viewing the work in its digital iteration. The website also contains links to earlier spurs of the project, including audio and video of some of the poems.

INTRODUCTION TO THE POEMS

This thesis seeks to specify the key critical components of epistolary poetics as separate and distinct from other poetic genres, and to and map significant moments of the form's emergence and change across the poetic landscape. In doing so, the critical portion of this enquiry traces the trajectory of epistolary poetics throughout history, contending that the epistolary form in contemporary poetry has an intriguing relationship to crisis or to trauma.

My research suggests that the epistolary form initially emerged in poetry as a political device, mobilized to negotiate acts of political intervention within the public sphere at moments of social unrest or instability. This model of poetic epistolarity persisted into modernity, but was ultimately supplanted by the notion of epistolary space as interior; the poetic epistolary voice understood as a cipher for emotional authenticity. This thesis seeks to demonstrate that significant strands of contemporary poetic practice mark yet another important transition in the use of the epistolary poem in relation to pressure or crisis: the movement of the epistle form as a medium of personal disclosure to a medium of personal disclosure *towards political ends*.

My research draws upon discourses of psychoanalysis and trauma studies, alongside the work of poets spanning generations and writing across a broad range of aesthetic and intellectual projects to identify this transition as one that aims to shift the focus of epistolary poetics from confession and towards testimony, testimony here defined as a radical act of witnessing, one that has implications for both poetry and politics.² This research is therefore

² Dori Laub, Shoshana Felman and Wendy Chung, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (Routledge, 2002) pp.29, 57, 94.

timely in two significant ways: that it contributes to our understanding of the epistolary poem as genre, and that it attends to an under-investigated tendency in contemporary poetry. By focussing on critical points of intersection between the use of letters in therapeutic practice, and their mobilisation by various cohorts within contemporary poetry united by their thematic concern with trauma in its various guises, this enquiry exposes the intimate yet hitherto unexplored relationship between the epistolary and the traumatic turn in contemporary poetry.

This thesis constitutes a practice-based autoethnographic intervention into knowledge, initiated by and emerging from my own experience of letter writing as both therapeutic strategy and poetic practice. My critical enquiry is driven by two book-length collections of poetry – *narrowcasting*, and *halting sites* – as well as the long, process-led performance poem – *caoin*. These several writing projects were provoked by the death by suicide of my oldest and closest friend, and by my subsequent enrolment in various therapeutic and psychoanalytic programs designed to treat the trauma of sudden and shocking bereavement. The poems are necessarily concerned, therefore, with uncovering the aesthetic disposition of a poetics of grief, which I contend is entirely different from a poetics of mourning, although the two terms have often been treated as synonymous by the existing literature.³

The poems in *narrowcasting* in particular address my inability to locate in either prescribed therapeutic strategy or in my own creative practice a language wholly adequate to the accommodation or expression of my grief. The search for a poetics of grief that I felt able to recognise as both authentic and ethical is enacted through my poetic texts, but is also

³ For example in Peter Sacks, *The English Elegy* (John Hopkins University Press, 1987), Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* (University of Chicago Press, 1994), and Diana Fuss, *Dying Modern: A Meditation on Elegy* (Duke, 2013).

sparked and shaped by a wide reading of poetic traditions and techniques for representing loss, and by the discourses of Trauma Studies, particularly Cathy Caruth's notion of 'impossible saying', the notion that trauma creates in those who experience it an imperative necessity to 'witness' or to 'tell' which exists in continuous conflict to the impossibility of meaningfully doing so.⁴

Caruth, along with Trauma Studies scholars such as Wendy Cheung, Shoshana Felman, and Dori Laub make the case for a literature of trauma that communicates in indirect and unexpected ways; that resists, in response to the intense pressure put upon language by trauma, forms of linear understanding and orderly narrative habit.⁵ My creative practice argues for the poetic epistle as a potential site for the embodiment of such a literature.

For Cheung, Felman and Laub 'testimonies are not monologues', and the work of 'witnessing' to traumatic experience cannot take place in solitude without a present and implicated reader.⁶ By hybridizing poetic and epistolary forms, and by framing the poems within a network of personal and therapeutic encounters, the early *narrowcasting* texts enact a project of urgent address; they create, to paraphrase Caruth, an address for the traumatic specificity of experience that obliterates or silences the very possibility of address.⁷

⁴ Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014) p.10.

⁵ Dori Laub, Shoshana Felman and Wendy Chung, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (Routledge, 2002) pp.29, 57, 94.

⁶ Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub M.D, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (Routledge, 2002) p.70.

⁷ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016) pp.28-3, pp.135-139.

In this concern with ethical address, Trauma Studies discourses share something with the projects of American Language poetry. Both sets of discourse place pressure upon a lyric 'I' compromised and implicated in the ominous projects of modernity; both share a suspicion toward the linear, narrative habits often attributed to lyric poetry, and its privileging of an exemplary confessional 'self'.

My creative practice led me to consider how similar is the contemporary lyric's desire to cathartically solve, resolve and translate experience into an ideal of emotional expressiveness to that coercive social pressure applied to traumatised minds and bodies. I connect this to what contemporary poet Joy Katz has described as the 'artifice of elegy', the desire to move beyond which has been an animating factor in much of my research.⁸

It is not artifice itself which is the stumbling block – how can it be? All language is made, all words are artificial – it is artifice towards one 'closed', definitive, and myopic end. I contend that the letter form allows for a slight alleviation of this ethical pressure: that it mobilizes lyric in ways transitory and ephemeral. Through the use of apostrophe in particular, epistolary poetry invoke and invites the other; it extends the opportunity for intersubjective exchange within a continuing present.⁹ It is suggestive of collaboration and contingency.

⁸ Poetry Off the Shelf, *Beyond The Artifice of Elegy*, November 6, 2013:

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/podcasts/76744/beyond-the-artifice-of-elegy>

⁹ Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (Cornell University, 1981), and Mark J. Smith, 'Apostrophe, or the Lyric Art of Turning Away' in *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 49, no. 4 (2007) pp. 411-37.

The epistolary poems collected here deploy the letter as a space of lament, and ask their reader to consider the act of letter writing as a form of lament practice. Traditional keening emphasises the sociality of grieving, of women in particular, coming together to merge and to share their losses in complex sonic performances, in charged, communal iterations.¹⁰ It might seem counter-intuitive to embed an ephemeral, performance-led practice such as keening into the textual fabric of the letter, but the letter, after all, is also a species of highly particular performance; the letter is also transitory, ephemeral. It doesn't document presence so much as it registers contingency: signalling the possibility of continuous and unpredictable communication. According to Carolyn Hamilton, letters are sites of double-storiedness, of intersecting temporalities.¹¹ Letters too might be seen to exist in the moment, creating a shared discursive space, where memory, mourning and protest meet. This is something I explore in detail, both through the poems themselves, and within the critical strand of my research.

My creative practice operates at the intersection of various discourses and concerns, and serves as the connective tissue between separate but related areas of enquiry. It is through practice that I uncover and investigate the relationships spanning discourses of trauma and poetics, of therapy and performance. I propose neither to ignore, nor to work against these autoethnographic intersections, but to account for them as organic and inherent to the way in which my creative practice generates knowledge. It is through the connections that practice exposes that I am uniquely able to perceive the relationships between bodies of knowledge that risk remaining undisclosed to traditional research methodologies.

¹⁰ Sarah McKibben, 'Angry Laments and Grieving Postcoloniality' *New Voices in Irish Criticism* ed. P.J. Matthews (Four Courts Press, 2013) p.220.

¹¹ Carolyn Hamilton, 'Archives, Ancestors, and the Contingency of Time' *Laute, Bilder, Texte: Register des Archivs*, ed. Alf Lüdtke and Tobias Nanz, (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015), p.115.

For example, a close reading of the various poetic texts written from or engaging with trauma fails to account for the ways in which lived experience impacts and is inscribed upon that text. Neither does this approach account for the multiple performative iterations of a text in contexts and communities beyond the printed page. Although close reading is necessarily an important facet of my research, the insights this approach affords are not sufficient in themselves to offer an original intervention into knowledge. It is only when considering the work in relation to the poet's larger social world that I am able to identify an emergent contemporary cohort. For this reason I take a broad survey approach to text, one that considers poets united by their engagement with traumatic experience. This approach allows me to situate my own practice, and acknowledges its participation in and across multiple poetic communities.

This hybrid approach also allows for the organic creation and development of new knowledge; because the direction of my critical reading is suggested and provoked by practice and not through the lens of established theory, my research is dynamic, exploratory and open. For example, it is through creative concern with the lament as the 'sound of trauma', that I came to incorporate sonic elements of traditional Irish keening into my performance piece. Close attention to the performative aspects of the keen raised intriguing questions about the relationship between memory, mourning and performance, and directed my reading towards Lyotard and to Deleuze.¹²

Exposing the performative affinities between poetic and psychoanalytic encounter lead me to investigate the registers of listening that are facilitated and demanded by both sets of

¹² Geoffrey Bennington, *Lyotard: Writing the Event* (Manchester University Press, 1988) p.11. For further discussion of the 'disreal space' please see p.78 of Volume 2 of this thesis.

practice, and to read, in clinical models of 'psychoanalytic listening', the 'close listening' advocated by Charles Bernstein and American Language poetry.¹³ This provoked a creative textual exploration of what it means to represent trauma beyond the 'confessional' or autobiographical discourses associated in popular consciousness with traumatic disclosure.

My poetic texts, then, drive, subsume and display the trajectory of my research, but they are also documents of consciousness, my own embodied response to trauma. They constitute both a record and a method of navigation, not only of grief, but the familial, cultural and historical traumas implicated in that grief, and the social, political and religious scripts that threaten to overwrite, erase or contain it.

Although my work emerges from inside the therapeutic encounter, it is also situated within a wider culture of publication, competition and review, and the texts respond to and inscribe this pressure in an act of continual self-interrogation. In doing so, the poems answer both literary and wider cultural criticism about the 'anything goes' exposure of the confessional mentality, and the very public rise in discourses of trauma, psychic sickness, and mental-illness.

As poet and scholar Rachel Blau DuPlessis writes in *The Pink Guitar*, the 'struggle on the page is not decorative'. The trauma that communicates itself through the poems is performative, yes, but purposeful. It is writing, as Blau DuPlessis would have it, 'not as personality, but praxis'. I argue through my own creative practice that the very act of representation and the forms this representation embodies have the potential to be sites of and occasions for

¹³ Charles Bernstein, *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word*, ed Charles Bernstein (Oxford University Press, 1998) pp.3-25.

meaningful struggle, a way of addressing the originary trauma in ways that do *not* construct fetishes from or exemplify individual pain, but instead offer a challenge to contemporary culture, and the institutions and perceptions that shape it.¹⁴

My epistolary poems mobilize the letter, not to elicit an autobiographical reading of experience, but to create a discursive space of investigation into both the failures and affordances of therapeutic practice, its modes, methods, trajectories and outcomes. By continually constructing then breaching the terms of their own intimacy, offering and then refusing 'entry' or disclosure through various paratactical strategies, the poems create a unique, unstable territory in which multiple kinds of intimacy and authority (bodily, textual, temporal) intersect and undermine each other.

My poetic practice has driven my reading of a wide range of contemporary poets engaging directly and critically with the lived experience of various therapeutic encounters, and deploying the letter as a space in which to problematize the notion of catharsis, and the moral imperative to 'heal' embedded in so much public discourse surrounding art and writing therapy. Language emerges from these pieces not as a therapeutic 'tool', but as a signpost to its own curative deficiencies; to the sites and situations that are devoid of resolution. In this way the texts advocate for a radical model of witnessing, one that rejects conventional narrative demands imposed either socially or clinically. In doing so the poems apply pressure to practice, both therapeutic and poetic; in hybridizing forms and blurring the boundaries between discourses the texts test their embedded assumptions, and call for a reawakening to the radical potentials of language and language encounters.

¹⁴ Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *The Pink Guitar: Writing as Feminist Practice* (University of Alabama Press, 2006) pp.172-17.

The poems refuse a purely symptomatic reading, and in doing so argue that the writing of traumatic experience may be understood, not at individual pathology alone, but instead as scenes of social protest, an urgent address to an implicated world that typically erases traumatised voices and bodies from public life. As therapeutic techniques and themes infiltrate literary spaces and cohorts it is possible to understand the texts not as testaments to personal pain, but as a lively and critical discourse on the aims and outcomes of therapeutic practice in our particular contemporary moment.

c a o i n

for voices

riff, (tennyson)

all things become dreadful all things

all things dread become full

all things come

are full taken

become dreadful portions all things

become dreadful parcels all things

are taken all things & the past

becomes and the past becomes

us (repeat)

first voice, (mania)

is obvious and soaring if beauty is
your condition of limit then nothing
we name will unspeak this

shock.

notorious and totally this low. inference
& function. a little becoming dependence.
didn't you know: dial tones too are
testimony.

on and on. and i was in a room, barefoot
and fabulating. seems like long ago. so long
blue, both empty and indecent. the sky says
this. a latent brain is a terrapin shell, turned
on its side. the pearly mathematics
of imbalance. mania – all flight risk
and canine disobedience – there is no
luminous nomenclature here. some low
corrective slowness. some revolting
coffee. these cells. lacerable, synchronised.

percussionist, disastrous biographer.
bring your pen, your many modes
of shocked perfection, perfect shock. poets,
you athletes of delirium, fuck *you*.

first voice, cont.

diaspora poorer poorer pouring over a porous border
martyn, you sing in the skin of me sink in the skin in
the sing of me. i am braced for your name i'm embracing
your name. mícheál, the english unmaking your name
and english fills my mouth with soil soils my mouth
with roses and bones. daddus, i'm bringing a rose
to your bones

second voice, (lyric)

in rooms tumescent mirthless heat. time skew. missequencing. omen formation. the boundaries we make with ritual. the boundaries we make with meaning. we like to think we are *free*. it is dark. being blind is like being naked. clear a space. white spire of flowers we crush a silence of varieties. missequencing in broken windows. small discords experienced as whispers. intrusive thoughts. dyslexic lobes will part the light like lips. your lips. a kiss. a torch. circles of influence, love's impatient centrifuge. *hold me*. by which you mean *synchronise*. small buoyancies displace the dark we sink the candles into. in rooms. time skew. this was *our* house. omen formation, rarely seen in adults. omen formation is a belief. *there were warning signs that predicted the trauma*. it is a belief. listed buildings, magical thinking.

first voice, cont.

candles skin the lights alive
magical thinking magical thinking

third voice, (memory)

gadje, you don't see me. or – only through the corrective lens of television. in which i am stars on the ceiling, fake tan, gargantuan skirts. gadje, i cannot *reach*. i can only *arrive*. i can only *intrude*. patron saint of uninvited guests. and what's the difference between *travel* and *transit*? tell me. i am sending letters again, this round unreasonable year of our lord. sending out letters in lieu of a self. there is no *self* to send. *traveller*, who goes nowhere. something i *am*, not something i *do*. figure-hugging floor-length wedding dress dear god. and the greatest distance is the written distance. and the greatest distance is the written word. i am sending letters again. they make the journeys i cannot make. extend myself through space this way. but if letters are my body – if perforated – if folded – if torn – each *opening* a scab picked, eyelid pried, lips – a minor violation. no. not minor. you are *breaking in*. you are reclaiming me, recolonizing me. and if you collect my letters, if you gather them in, then that is *rain* becoming *water*. *poet* is to *biddy* what *beef* is to *cow*

first voice, cont.

enough. the unmade eye has trapped
your bony light inside itself i can't
disintegrate in sleep. this pain

your pain

i borrow a shimmering weight i walk my own
wrist to mutiny all unyielding. *dear one*
in the strewn dusk. unwind a shy affinity
in smoke, in broken teeth and tall

buildings. glass slippers abandoned on
a treacherous step. comb my hair across
your obdurate unbruising surfaces. *oh!*

absolute and absolutist luck

when you are not yet dolorous undignified
with thirst. death, a tender hearted,
indiscriminate thief and yet

love is an atom we consecrate in splitting

first voice, cont.

if the eye, limpet recidivist, sick of seeing.
if birds have split the sky in two. if clouds
as thin as shirts. if shirts as thin
as the eyelids of the blind. if we must walk
 endangered into some expectant dark.
if tongues break rank like weeds and leave
the mouth, its fuehrer-bunker overrun.
the suicide of saying.

 towns, if towns are blank expressions
worn by motorways. motorways.
if motorways are maori tattoos.

 the singing line made blatant skin.
if skin. no. if libraries, illegally yellow, lit
like gambling dens. or else like millionaires'
aquariums. light. if light is left to shrink
in glove compartments, fridges. sinking
into vinegars and penicillins. phlegm
and dreg. if we should sink. if we should
spill out our constituent selves. lipase
 adipose accelerated particles. carats
nitrates. everything.

 if we exceed our shape, become
both hieroglyph and enzyme. break
the body. floe and sprawl. stains against
striped mattresses. if a body is a poem.
blue edelweiss. the word's irrational
authority. the word's deliberate
unhinging. if a body is a phantom atlas.
worse, a gilded steak. if *vertu*. if *loa* –
 not prayed to but *served*. who is
not mad? to say my name, conjure

a shaved helix spinning in the smallest
room. to vomit up some brawling gene.
the axe goes on collecting necks. if i am

never

built back up. configured and forgotten in
a box. in offices no bigger than the booths
at county fairs. purest spectacle. conjoined
aurochs giving birth. the bearded freak.
cadaverous somnambulist ascending.

ich muss caligari werden...

repressed upon a tilted stair. if a thin
eclipse in a doctor's coat. if a student
with an idiot smile. if smiles like dirty words
spelled out on pocket calculators.
if payroll, starving numbers into straight lines.
if faculty members, binding their arguments in
human skin. if arrant bitches, beserking
and preening. if in a tall house propitious
for enmity. to be a pair of bare legs
on the window-ledge, a rope around
a pointless neck. if grandma, toothlessly
implacable, gentles an egg on her lower
lip. raw. there's *nothing* they can teach
us. refuse to eat. become a hair-serpent
and find yourself stubbornly purified.
if this privileged monster wakes.
who is not mad? here the severe

pornographies of architects. wet dream
of a glass wall as see-through as a summer
dress. a summer day. if money. the instruments
of our enchantment. if gauges and scales.

a darger heart suspended like an olive
in brine. most immaculate shipwreck,

rudest north the compass points to.
if a mainmast raised in a hollow bottle.
if pain like a toothpick
 stuck in a cherry. poet: the eye
is both a tyrant and a pervert.
if tired of seeing. if the sea is a shrine. her altar
is an anvil. a candle is a hammer,
and all desires are beaten flat. if the sea
is sharpening itself against the tillers
of sailing boats. a pathology
of anchors. if we are dragged to davey jones.
 if. the mind has its own
errant anatomies. bone spurs, accretions
of calcium, cysts and nodes. if skin.
no. skin is a blanket statement. a flat denial.
these millimetric deaths. these jolts. i woke
this morning and was not normal.
a woman in only my soldiering pheromone.
*and gender's not a spectrum it's a system
of oppression.*
i watched the ghosts go round and round
caught in their own recursive drowning.
laughed. forgot i'd have to suffer
their buttons to enclose me. all day attending
to the insane organs of the state: newry.
derry. an internet petition. the way
a sunflower is a forgery, too golden to be
real. too good. paring an apple
 with a peaceable blade.
a choir in sceptic unison outside. mapping
my apple grown suddenly globe.
and yes, yes, there's an apple in his eye.
 and i

have dedicated my finest monotone to
talking him
out of it. if brash unlove were half the cure.
disgusting fibroid realms inside.
escapes of such minute devising. if sinister.
if stoic.
and if conspicuous symmetry: deimatic
behaviour, startle display. bilateral eyespots,
sightless, furred. if *running away*. if birds
have sung the sky in two. if brains in
their fullerene pentagons, glowing.
if chatterton, stoned. if chatterton stretched out in
the grim luetic flux of his genius. and mercury.
if mercury's a means to moody iridescence.
who is not mad? imprint this petechial zodiac.
jump. let your own weight work out the rest.
if artwad bitch with millennial smoothie. if half
a brain paid for in instalments.
if the mind's own tangled marginalia, corvine
faces sporting horns. the overgrowth,
the undergrowth. any place
a foxy thought is thriving. footnotes. enough.
to yearn for sleep, its kind encompassing. initiates
and avatars. cartoon disciples of the cold idea.
they do not know. intelligence is tidal,
eroding at the edge of flesh. to wish
to be all mind, no body. don't touch me.
don't remind me i exist. if the wind is singing
like the zip on a nylon tracksuit.
if the wind telephone.
if the barking dog is writing our spangled
memoirs. telling it on the mountain.
if tender perplexity. to be lady macbeth

in a kingdom of familiars. to be hamlet starting
at his father's ghost. if only ourselves.
if only each other. if this too shall pass.

third voice, cont.

light moves at the same speed in any direction. if i was travelling at the speed of light i wouldn't see my own face in the mirror, and life is like that. catastrophic immanence. hate mail awaited daily. the hour has me surrounded. a siren's shrieking religionless knell. i am winding watches like god. engines reverence engines. an evensong of handbrake turns. joyriding. without the *joy*. the planet's heating up. and donald trump will make a soiree of extinction. doesn't talk in sentences, but bumper stickers. psychotic with sincerity. wants to *make love to the world*. david fucking berkowitz. *do your thoughts assume the shape of a giant insect, of a big black dog?* alone in the maundering ordinary failed at everything. my eating disorder, a renaissance of ruined teeth i make perversion out of protein. the plenty of a settled life, it serves us right, the garden gagged in plastic. light moves. bad brains bloated on bad news. amateur savant, spatial waste. vomits like a dog that eats its vomit. community violence. doom. missequencing. *ten men dead saves our lead*. after the invention of gravity, nineteen sixteen was mostly downhill.

first voice, cont.

broken hearted i'll wander, for the loss of my lover, he's my bonny light horseman, in the wars
he was slain...

third voice, cont.

in rooms. recent hygienes, disconcerted calories. the on-going genocide of bathroom germs. i must cut carbs to trump a falling feather. on the beach in black denim. a starchy exertion in sweat, three pairs of tights. skin like cold potato. indifference is monogamy. boundaries. a name is a place of trespass. i have *my father's eyes*. green flints that fail the turing test. the fruit here is less toxic and more rotten. oh, my omnidirectional sense of shame! present myself to the fan-girling multitude: *here i am!* in my dreams i can declare myself, i can beat the computer at chess. the sea remains upon my lips like a lovely name. airport. england. men with luddite buttonholes howling how *they died for you*. the pulse's soft homing. the camp we made at glandore. no one died for me. in rooms. gets worse. a scream is clenched inside a velvet mouth, meaning night, the night's velvet reflex. boys who stabbed a man for cigarettes. saturday has amphetamine breath, a jittery inclination. the pencil-necked dependants in the park. *i wish the pain would stop*. my hopeless platelets, white like paper boats and floating doomed. and it gets worse every day. the blue electric drips on regent street as angels open up like wet umbrellas. a prayer to a saint with a fragrant name. method acting my salvation. *omen formation*. is a word that tastes like breaking. skinny wrists bemoan my bangles. there are no other *places*. the future is a straight line i find offensive. clever girl, fawning at a border with her deadpan erudition: *a word might tell us who we are. on how many levels are your poems working?* there is no ancestry. only now. the exhaustible geography of grievance. unmoored acre of green after green. there is nowhere to go. there is no *go*. naming doesn't dance.

first voice, cont.

in rooms / if guns / in rooms / if guns /
in rooms / if guns / in rooms / if guns /
in rooms / if guns / in rooms / if guns /
if guns / if guns / if guns / if guns / if guns //

second voice, cont.

the meek will inherit their god, his tongue like a tattered
coat. the family, cold and paupering, gathering in corners
a red morning has deserted. eyes to the broken climate. our
flesh bittered. forensic melancholy. culture: it's anything
you dig from earth.

first voice, cont.

passions perturbations,
 horny, lonely and afraid.
the axe head yearns for your neck
you said. addiction's a waltz with
continuous swooning. *oh*,
the arrogant nobility of skangers
hoodies youths who *die for their country*
cunt . tree. any mother's suck.
 and *omnia sunt communia*
is a stunt grief, a latin stutter. *oh*,
they cut off his head at the peasants' revolt!
it went on speaking its difficult creed.
legends are born from a woman
child, her mercenary frailty
 sunlight like a hammer to the blue
religious window. i am sick of kathleen
lynn & i am sick of rosa luxemburg
& i am sick of bobby sands.
 my loss, my injudicious anarchy.
enough. it isn't. enough.
grief as a militant methodology.
 our failures shape us
desire reflects in filth. history repeats
as tragedy, as farce, and then –
 pornography
as dazed by victory as victimhood.
a moony light entangled in the lampposts
night now. the spoons in the kitchen
 discretely stained, shelter the black
quiescent quarter inch. fastidious
unsavoury. from such things

is sainthood made. the unredeemed houses
the daily unrequited grind love
will not transmute your vexed meat
to nearly god.
the structure of disorder –
 to celebrate a tangled chain.

second voice, cont.

you were dead when only the books had power you were dead when the sun came up i didn't
know the name for grief i didn't know the name for not knowing the name i couldn't call
things by their names english is a slow perishing in the brain.

first voice, cont.

chips with everything i wish
i was back home in derry they want
a soft eyed boy amenable to myth.
not you, ferret faced and feuding
i wish i was back home in derry
a mountain emerges, as if startled
from behind a burning block of flats.
bejewelled indifferent sea. a venusy glow
green on the backs of my hands i wish
i was back home in derry
if he'd lived they say *if* a tall boy gentles
his destiny, awaits the dizzy rite
that stiffens him. battered
cod with everything i wish
i was back home in derry.
daddus reclines, lazily suffering,
beautiful, so very catholic. i want
i want contorted tawny girl in
a ghetto stairwell doing drunken plunge.
we numb ourselves to blurred
statement
i wish i was back home in derry
riding a bad mood bareback
wavering scathed we haven't earned
the right to strive. we ask for nothing make
a monologue of this exhaustion. i wish –
enough

second voice / fist voice, cont.

there's an old man singing i wish
i was back home in derry

third voice, cont.

gadje, gade, oh most excellent and lamentable gadjedy – you do not see me. and i am only *restless* because i am not *free*. i will never be free. to *travel* is to test the limits of confinement. yours or mine. ask me again: *what belongs to you? to what do you belong?* i belong to brokenness. m is gone. no. don't say m, say michael. no. don't say michael, say mícheál. no. say *gone*. i sink into the mirror, my face is a footprint in wet sand. i want to disappear. i envy the dead their vanishing. fuck yeah, to be a blind weight that only the water records.

first voice, cont.

never enough your silhouette
scallied over the shed roof dirty
fences compromised parks.
the eunuch faces of policemen
mouths pinched in prim castrated
pique mouths picked clean.
defeated liquidity. the whole
world melts without thaw.

 death in unnecessary anne
summers

silk. *fever!*

 french knickers, camisole top
your licking her rapt and cynical
flesh. paisley on
the fucking telly, head distended:
the cum face of some agonised ghost
i'm all alone, i'm all alone. prescient
 pig-fuck netflix for company
i 'll burn my researches. the world
is a stage.

third voice, cont.

there are so few places we might own: the roots of teeth, the hems of skirts, eyelets of an unlaced boot. *misaffection*, virally triumphant and teeming in my schema. hey there, sleepy head, *a poem isn't evidence*, they said. we have disappeared inside the gap-tooth textbooks full of holes and history's not written, it's a pestilence we borrow back from breath your punctured lung equivocates with air. i could pervert a pretty word with meaning: *wound* or *fire* or – *love* inscribes misguided shapes upon the eye.

first voice, cont.

safe house say – fuh – house
anger climbs into the plushy
cockpit of my mouth want to –
where the wall is fraught
with slogans. in the out of town
crematoria, an ecstasy of ashes.
say –fuh – pair of hands
to tighten the bolt
in your neck. little monster
electrically alive. and we're falling
down, nursing a nursery fate
like london bridge. monotonous
bodies in space conform
to the limp math holding
the universe together
strong force weak force
the symbols snuggle up, spoon
in their shallow brackets.
there's a shame that fits tight
to my body like the skin
of an apple. you float
in the centre of my headache
i discover myself in a doorway
streets alert with lights and a light
rain prickles the skin of an apple
the skin of a dark pond a partial mania
i hold this poem like a note
to the light watermark we mark
the water. enter here
inter –

second voice, cont.

the squalid diction of small towns.
the musicless startle of fists in a rural
night. your life is your life is your face,
exceptional in searchlights. omen
formation. manifest destiny. black
mountains banded together like a lynch
mob. *pikeys out! pikeys out!*

third voice, cont.

i saw you, *see* you. the mind distils a crippled image, clocks are speaking into grievance every awful hour i spend awake. you bristle with disfigurements, a sharp intake i can't connect to breath, i'm thinking about breath, breath isn't speech, which mutilates the purity of silence with a word, an *act* of violence. as if all action were not violence. westie, she shelters her received wisdom in a fist. it's four o' clock and healing has emptied its chemistry into me *risperdal* whisperdel. the brain reels a beleaguered astronomy: *i have seen stars!* and the screen swallows me. oh, if i could unbend these bars in sleep's subtle geography. a securitised window without curtains. my blighted depth-perception paints you on the sky, the street, the square. your bat-symbol silhouette intimidates the evening, black against graffiti streaks of pinkish light i see you, i see everything, the eye sings with it, but i am unable to speak. there isn't breath or sense enough to speak, what should i say? i call a disconnected number on my mobile. technology has built a wall with *reaching*. telephone not bridge but dam cut off in your high castle, immortal mouthpiece. spectral parenthesis. emphasis. and this – a lead prosthetic for memory, receiver is acute roulette, the gun against the temple, *temple*. silence, which isn't *pleading*, *prayed*. that isn't silence. citric lisp of acid hissing in a cut. hold it up, an ice-pack pressure to the head, cold weight we wear against our listening

third voice, cont.

i would talk with you, would stammer out my plenary impediment to god, but no, no one is there. i am indulging a dial-tone alone. *alone*. or what? the dead, the dead momentum of breath, the city's barking discord. *held* or *spent*. aspiring microclimate of my living room on fire. i was thinking about breath, dragging on profanity like cigarettes, the flats were burning – incandescent habitat, and you descend like lucifer, son of the morning, sun of the morning, both supple and buckled with fire. your brilliance, catastrophe of coattails, streaming like a comet, your face split inside your hoodie, white bean ripe for shelling, young so young not again not again, close my eyes, tread medicine like water. an efficacious dread that keeps me sane.

first voice, cont.

greysteel flays a soldered kiss
from cheekbones that could split
a hair. the sunlight's bright
implausible forward, upright.
dream to me a formless sacred
 form less scarred.

third voice, cont.

picture *this*: our joy-ridden ramparts inventing breath from mayhem, from whoops and sighs, the hobnail suicides of farmers. but it is only you that matters. distortion gnaws me, white noise, bandages of static. install a silver tongue to wag at words. i was thinking about breath. i was thinking of dark stairwells you have gagged in, inhaling piss, brutalised, resilient – and failure. failure of power, *powers*, a barricade. breath is a barricade. a poem won't *consider*, it consigns. archive. technology has built a wall with reaching. i type you into distance i diminish you with each exhale. and history a hardboiled breath we choke on. the frowsy, swooning griefs of late victorians. encase the heavy hour in clocks, corseted antiques, time isn't *told* but *summoned* by breath. i was thinking about breath, the drawing in of fire with skittish friction, the only thing alive amidst monday's ponderous melancholy – obdurate melancholy, lactose intolerant melancholy – and bodies, allergens and pathogens alive, alive-oh! and breath, streetlight, a lurid stupor. progress. three a.m. a comb through frozen hair, jaundiced, stoned on bromide, an angel tilts his wingspan at the world and makes a debris out of legend. breath, catastrophe's percussion, wave after wave of a halcyon doom we falter with in step.

second voice:

what is ever finalised? the phone they tap. the spirit voices, captured, filed. picture it: gchq as spirit mediums. high lace collars, cherry ripe. *who are you talking to?* they said *you do not have the accent.* they said. they said. conflicted and conflated, and girl into olympia and into ghost and into–

third voice, cont.

medicine's unsympathetic shelter. and cuts, *there have been cuts*, a meat rendition, summer's muggy intercourse, then winter, disaster's slang we lunge and shrug and cauterise a short fuse with a cigarette. the mouth is open, getting breath, placating the palate with glass, stones, feathers. dame melancholy crushes your timorous intention underfoot. luminescent eczema, stars. the moths will eat posterity to lace. breath, lung's catalytic labyrinth. am i getting through? the body you made hobby of. cantharidin you trailed your tongue through, virulent with blisters. solvent longing cradling the vein. and the angel spoke, and he said *breath*. remember to breathe, through fried chicken, love's indifferent disciplines. put on your shortest skirt and run through the nine o' clock news, pulling focus on a shaken baby woman: like black snakes hatching from an eyeball. the red lens swallows you. detached machismo with a bag over your head. pack up your moods in a suitcase like a body in a bathtub, like a lady sawn in half. *exhale* alone. a totally pedestrian neglect. big pharma brooding like mother goose. het princess in spangled leggings: dame melancholy, spoon fed high soprano, will lay to waste to order, take a flick knife to a backpack. someone's got to pay for this. everything is funny *lots of planets have a north...*

third voice / first voice, cont.

daddus. breath. *breathe*. the dead come back as breath. the nights you knock on women, wood. *angels are not archetypes but allegories*. sad as a discarded shoe, trapped in ana's convalescent bondage, his hands coldly cupping like martini glasses, decently chilled – dame melancholy herself, drunk. she turns her tousled antipathy on you. mortified in sequins splayed. spread-legged compass grading curves and infantile with defects. she snarls a *fuck you* fit for stripping paint. breath. a witless burden in the lung. hash. the disenchanting lethargies of backseats, council housing. hashed *and* tagged and she is gratuitously fertile. she is narrow as a hammer. she is. she is. she is – breath. and their zippers are singing. sex is a ballad for hooks and hinges. the turned page talks to you by torn degrees. release the foreseeable future from your fingertips. your teeth play tetris. your knuckles ripe and primed. you are holding your mouth in your mouth. your breath. undressing your body heat. breath. a climate we create from phobia and smoke.

first voice / second voice, cont.

let's all think about *murderous listening!*

second voice, cont.

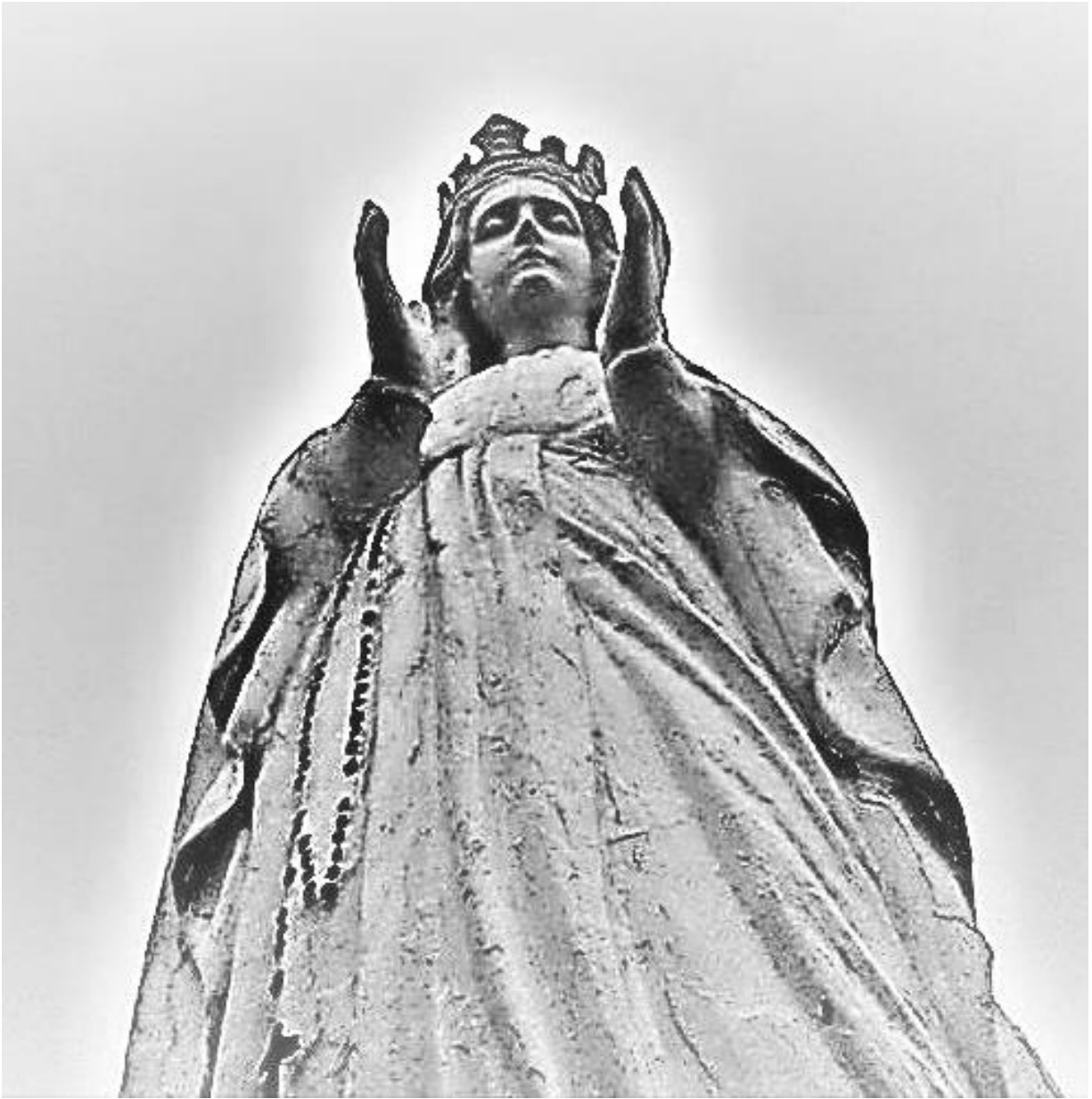
yes. lover, this entire week is *passable* or *passible*. the truth will out. the godless probability of pills. guns. martyrs – hunting up a skinny fix, weaving in and out the squint-windowed cars parked up around the cambridge. don't you know this: you re-inscribe your exile everywhere you go. i won't be mary, xeroxing sobs in an olive garden. i am done crying, sick of loops and labels, sick of my sad faction, dilapidated goth girls for whom *every day is halloween*. go for a walk. m will happen like a headache. outside the church, little girls going to reprimands and rosaries, a garden of punctual flowers. *text* is *tissue*, kittler said, and *i* am my machine. this isn't thought but film and film is an image without breath and without breath – christ's smiling face an ornament of thorns, his rosy cheeks in living rooms. you and i knew best about pain, *beheld a hemisphere* of smarting shadow, licked our singed fingers, walked into hell with a *heigh-ho!* whistle. if i could rewind you, not in film, but flesh, if we could get back breath enough to fill you but –

second voice, cont.

i use a typewriter . my punctuation punches points of light in paper. they are nothing to navigate by, not pseudo-stars, they are holes in the head's proximity, the heart's. my letters are shot at like targets. *riddled*. do you know this song: *if guns are made for shooting, then skulls are made to crack...?* write on the wall like a schoolboy signing a plaster cast. *peace wall?* gadje, all walls are violence. a poem is a list of everything i'm half of. *belonging*. belonging is a frail shape i float like folded paper. to be longing, always. hashtag: *that isn't a language*. hashtag: *that's not a real name*. hashtag: *snake cult*. hashtag: *plain of prostration*. and i was dreaming of mary on a white horse the size of a stretch limo, and i was doing the quick crossword in thirty-five minutes, and i was lying on the sofa while the tv loosened its grip on me, the knit of me, and i was wearing red and glitter in the liniments of disco, and his tattoo was a tale told by an idiot, and i was getting thinner, and i was becoming the breath he paused for, and i was a *princess*, and i was a rosy ball of havoc, and i went into the constant forest, forest to a fault, so green, and i saw a boy in a black tracksuit screaming *money is my country!* and i still wasn't real. what is the exact difference between *charmed* and *enchanted*? occupation's stuttered fluency. it isn't the army it's the knack of never possessing what you cling to. *home* is a space only *occupied*, never *inhabited*. this poem is the eye i gouge in going. this poem the green eye rinsed of its witness –

first voice, cont. forever

his yellow hair raving like incident tape.



selected poems from
n a r r o w c a s t i n g

1.

dear –

i have mourned you, but i have not grieved. a poem can only complete your invisibility. i have made you staple of my own cringing discourse far too long. the poem does not hold you. the poem is the mythic space you vanish into. i was saying your name last night. i was typing and then deleting your name. your name became mere pause in my staggered syntax. this is the underwhelming violence that a poem does. can do. i have done this to you. i have said: *england is at fault*. i have tried to unmake english with english. would you forgive this, whose body is dissolved into ochres and flotsams, offals and pigments? you disappear between the pixels in a digital image. this image is *rendered*, like ritual fat, and you are absent. or – vanished. disappearance is something they do to you. i want to eat you, inhabit you. both. i have mourned you, but i have not grieved. the poem meant to take you home, from nation, church, from *big fat gypsy weddings* and the ethnographic freak-show their cameramen call culture. i meant to take you home. by which i mean make real by which i mean both manifest and absolute. and plain. but there's an erring in me, in all my works: the lyric comes, insinuating ritual, makes uneven inroads into evening's liquorice light, makes more of death than this: your body's warped misfortune. as if that wasn't enough. language, loverboy, erasing the raw care that is love's stern fixation. *tenderness. tending*. this sliver of meaning is the edge of a pendulum. language, which can only flirt the limits of any imperative thing. poem, enclosed order of my own raving faith. star crossed cult of martyn / michael / angel. i'm doing my nut. i'm climbing the carmelite walls of me. words like thorns to frame your blighted sainthood. your lambency is tangent, ecstatic smile like acid house...

...there's a need to connect, claustrophobic intent, one-hundred-and-seventy-one steps at russell square station. and i go down forever, in a spiralling light, in dust and snippets. and there is a pain like dragging my soft specifics nude over dry gravel. a pain i *relish*. a pain i *cherish*. having lost the fine distinction between relishing and cherishing. i tried to starve myself to death. i never learnt to discriminate between *open* and *empty*. the hard science that a circle does. a zero. when you died they sewed the sky inside your mouth. that is to say a body, your body, a dead body with dry black oblong wounds like duct tape over rusted

chrome, that this body, your body is such a place as all horizons meet. are met. and end. when you died you were depthless. and i was awake for years, sounding the flat slant of your face in photographs. we are poltergeist. we are running interference. we are running. interfered. inter feared. into fear. the world is too big to contain you. language is too big. and all i have, poetics of a compromised immunity. i cannot keep you safe. or me. there is no *safe*. there is no *kept*. you're in the dizzy air. the weather drinks your hurtled measure, flown or flung above flyovers, industrial chimneys. or worse: you become a border that i cannot cross, even in sleep. especially with words. most especially with words. i must not charm this, soul this. poem must not make of love a mix-tape of christian mysteries. not this time. poem will not make ice crystals of your captured carbons, trap you, like general zod, howling in the phantom zone. poem must be a reaching, not a grounding. but how *reaching*? and how *touching*? describing your thin arms, greenish pink like stalks of wild rhubarb. describing my recurring dream where the man who murdered you. boy. i mean boy. when the boy who murdered another boy is fucking me, fucking us, and violently. taste of his intruded tongue, and you are wearing thin till licked to sinew. i did not know it was permissible to dream such things. and i still don't. but this is the way. conjured, not captured. a hat pulled out of a rabbit. i risk this thought this us this you my mind on all the ignorant technologies of touch. touching. reaching. there is no sharing without friction. repeat after me: *there is no sharing without friction...*

...it is this way: sometimes you do not belong to your name. today, for example. what belongs to your name is not your body, not your gorgeous insomniac pedigree, nor the wastrel vocations of youth. what belongs to your name is a void in text and sense, saying *i have mourned you, but i have not grieved* over and over into a megaphone. tonight i have grieved, all the intrigues of decay. grieved, for all that still remains. remains. i write your name with a capital letter. i write your name as a single initial. i abandon your name completely. your name is not your body. your name is only a violent event that puts an end to naming. the whole world walks inside you. i tell them: *i mean you no harm*. i tell them: *fuck against forgetting*. i tell them -. i do not know what i have told. i am here. i am alive. but i cannot acclimatise. camden town's irreverent alchemies. my back was a mad mechanical bull. malfunction. rodeo. ricochet. calamity cowgirl. tomorrow we will speak of the north. but for now the injured hemispheres i lick your wet electric from... ...there are other griefs. childhood has its dowdy traumas too. its poverties, abuses. an airless and infertile twilight, forced to things in backs of

cars. and norn, archive of all our fatal prerogatives, has swallowed you. exceptional, invisible. the poem swallows you. our witnessing swallows you. our lore swallows you. your own story swallows you, eats you like an alibi. you were not here. we can only speak the seismic registers of grief: black slates that fly apart like flocks of birds; a boy as crushed to death beneath a stuttering carceral gravity. little kid shot shoeless in a stairwell. how many, and how young? tally me a coffin, tally me a twenty-one rifle salute, tally me a nylon flag sliding from streaky water stained beechwood. supremely swallowed, you. scattered and gathered by turns: cinders, chalk, belfast confetti, shook out of heavy duty sacks, blown back into the swept heap of all dead catholic scally youth. *heavy duty*. our heavy duty: poet this. collaborate. poetry performs but does not experience grief. when words are what we do instead of feeling. instead of stag mask. instead of raisins and wailing. instead of *pomana*. poetry is an engine of invisibility. enough. i am giving michael back to michael you are not our indiscriminate dead. this is not history but life. i blow the dust from your genital antiquities. i hold you in my mouth. your meat, your meaning. like a spoon holds an egg...

...mirror, mirror, how my face hangs open in an incompleting panic, this day of our lord, twenty sixteen, and febrile with all a fact can't show, has hid behind itself, has hid itself behind. reportage, distortion, the folksong flourishing its fictions, footage ever flickered. tired now, and silence sprawls and stretches like a cat, and here, within the empty house, you are becoming me. text as bed of roses. text as bed of nails. text as a bed of nettles. text as plaguey bed of youth – a mattress in a graveyard. text where all your dispossessed perfection pours out and pummels me. punching bag. i am a girl with sights for eyes. come to the heather, to this demilitarized bower. share this hazardous hybridity. fractured compound. i sing my colonised complicity. i sing more than my own whinnying banishment for a change. i am also you now. and grief is more than egotistical teething. i take a handful of green gravel from the grave of your father and suck off the lime. then spit. my mouth is open. my legs. ready to receive a storm. and giggling, writing this as if it's funny. bad writing and i know it, but it's funny, funny ha-ha 'cause it's true. and it's all – a trapped nerve, a tapped wire. the received wisdom of pornography. how woman crave debasement. but i do. i do. and cider and muscle relaxants, skag, everything we're swollen with or glutted on. and you. becoming me. becoming –. romancing a maimed light guzzled in rooms. our mainlined metabolic. poetry. this, no other, poetry, no poetry, no other poetry. your fist inside me like a forced bloom.

f

dear – well, how to call you, in the dustiest hour before dawn when all naming is summoning?
 let's say you are my *comrade*, my *cousin*, my *quare fellow*. let's assign you a letter, randomly.
 let's call you x, no longer a man but a horizontal axis. or, this one time, let us call you what you
 are. okay? dear ghost –

it has been a long day all month. i need to focus on my thesis but i can't not think of you, your
 daggered grammar, your mouth and its moist violations. my memories of you are very
 visceral. english people don't think about memory as a physical thing, but it is, a luscious hurt
 we *carry* and *withstand* or else are absorbed into. i don't think of you as a face or a name, i
 think of you as the sensations you produce, the heat, the damp. you are nothing like your
 photo: indifferent pigments / flags, past-perfect daybreak / imploded azuline. this isn't you,
ghetto rat who broke his strut on stones / bantam swagger, broke on stones. jenny says that
 context is *everything*. hellfast, then, and me an oracle of bad grace stomping the corridors in
 doctor marten boots; the gratuitous humidity of rooms in which we wait. *the waiting room*. it
 is the room that's waiting. when you died my thoughts were so confused. i had this dream
 every night for a week: azrael, calamitous and dogfaced, chasing his tail. i'd wake up to the din
 from the streets, monoxide and bravado, and parades going past, grown men dry-humping
 their myth-mettled dead. i'd go downstairs only after dark, drink flat lemonade from the bottle,
 pick an uneaten crust off a plate. the moon outside, perverse and glittering. i lived that way
 for a long time, sorrow's timid season, and an old man singing *i wish i was back home in
 derry...*

...jenny counts my calcites. i have a *food diary*. this is humiliating. thinking about last time i
 was over, me and your brother drove around for hours, seeking roadside solace in a shrine.
 saw a dead bird like a lost glove, immaculately white. in a funny way that was the last time i
 was truly happy. london is harder, all the english faces, mildly appalled. sometimes time's all
 wrong. mislaid a decade in that *waiting room*. i can't believe it's been so many years.
 footprints in the hindbrain, an impression in wet cement, the weight of you walked over me.
 jenny's office is weird, cats like lepers with bells on their collars, in and out, and feminist
 tracts on the table. thinking of you here makes me feel treacherous: you're a boy, with pubic
 hair like pencil shavings. nothing about you disgusts me. the living disgust me. pandemic

faces in a light like washing up. she asks me do i still see you? *no*. but i am keeping the eye duplicitously peeled...

...it will be a long day all week. i have written *raisins!* eighteen times in my *food diary* as a kind of protest. i can tolerate eating only as ritual. i take seeds and pulses into my mouth without chewing, the way the dead do. death has its own slippery, fluttering music, but i'm not supposed to think that way. i like these foggy mornings best, *smother of pearl*, and the ornamental water in the park is frozen solid, green in that late-night-pharmacy way. i still wake up clutching my chest sometimes. there's fear's black yodel in the smoggy night. i dream about your mother, her cataracts like jellyfish. she said: *you do not live here anymore*. she said: *you've always never come from here*. her narrow lips, her murky slang, a hiss like gas. and you, drifting in on a cigarette, distort a floral scent in rooms we tried to clean...

...i need to focus. my critical component isn't going very well. i type over and over the smudgy mission-statement of my madness. i go to class but i never arrive, i do not belong there. i belong with the girls whose small withholding is a mutiny, whose breasts are goblin fruit, who rake the dark nights up like owls. girls, hermetic machines. girls, the unyielding blond cognition of dolls. i belong to the obstinate modesty of *gypsy*. i was groomed for absolution in the routine school, gingham and limping. i was supposed to marry you, and now i don't know how to live.

f

dear ghost,

i fell down today. i'd been in the library reading carole stone on elegy: she says that women's poetry of mourning is a refusal to *give up* their dead. poems of affiliation, the desperate urge to reassert a lost connection. but i don't think so. we know better than that. what if it's you who won't let go of us? what if all these words are the visible signs of our struggle to be free? *barnacles*, plath says. good aul' plath. i was on the tube and thinking this, and it was so hot, and i closed my eyes and there was your brother at a republican funeral: the way he parts his hair, the way he ruins a salute with a running nose. and there are you, blood's red apprentice, running your tongue across your teeth like a bow across a string. and i saw small white flowers like pale hammers. and i wanted words and i felt so trapped. i sagged into myself like an apple going brown. a woman hauled me off at kennington. i didn't say *thank you*. language is amber. we swim a gold imprisonment we dare not name.

f

4.

dear ghost,

today was mainly whey-faced in a hemisphere of shadows. that, and being called a *hardboiled cunt* on social media. and i was thinking about naming. *ghost* does not describe you, it is too vague, too charitable. jenny said romanticism is dangerous. i need to make contact with reality, allow myself to consider your gangrenous specificity, a body eaten up or blown out as a black light. she's right, but a name weighs anchor, ties you to more than myself. i don't want that. i'm not ready. something else, then, a name like an open door for you to walk through: *compañero, gallowglass, angel, baby.*

f

baby,

doom's slender evangelist, prancing out of a popular song, out of the night, out of my own snaggletoothed imbalance. you came, when the black balloon was terror's chosen metaphor, and the black balloon was *everywhere*. no one knew the world was ending. buttonholes predicted poppies; red kept *getting on you* with its shamefaced sensibility. history had carved a cruel act out of flesh. we were taking refuge in a wound, in woundedness, when victimhood is shelter of a sort, a place to go to avoid having to think. friday, with r.e.m. on the radio. dejected data. clickbait, interpreted like entrails. money, our skinny green disease. i'm typing at a former colleague *pay me what you owe me, you mouldy posho fuck*, but no, i know, he never will. somewhere, over the rainbow's phobic pouting spectrum, there is a place for us: a french café in soho. free wi-fi, and my bandwidth is a parachute, the signal *sings a rainbow too*. reading jeremy, his similes like sequins. screen burn. the eye's unsplendid choreography, black dots. my need to sleep is a flea circus.

f

and you *are* my ever-lovin' *baby*,

nobody puts you in the shade. disaster approaches with its long tongue out like a dog. and you came out of the night, out of the sky. white light declares a haunting, debates a bird. sky unset, rinsed of egotistical weather. walking through the square, a kid in chubby rubber boots beneath his numbered days. nobody knew the world was ending, not the callow american youth, adrift in self-esteem, not the haircuts of the cold idea that puts you to sleep for a million years. they told me writing was *greed by other means*, a constant *sucking up* of everything that isn't me. which is true: i read victoriana and incorporate the fucking crossbones out of it. it's what the mad do. sky, indiscriminate sky, an indifferent equality and i am in the supermarket: meat's dismembered motley, glucose, a woman in a hairnet varnishing a star. *baby*, it's all too much. sweetness twists a tooth with pliers. embrace your broken body. all spokes. impractical as bagpipes.

f

baby,

when i say *baby* i'm thinking about the start of *2001, a space odyssey*, or the inside of my body like faked footage of a moon landing. and jenny says what does it mean for someone like me to address you like this. and my supervisors want to know what this tells us about time. daylight congeals a dress, bookshelves, blue bowl, sleeping dog. oh, zopiclone, the tyrant eye won't close! thought, then. inevitable nicotine, my misfit tendency, black mud. i'm so strong. i'm ill-equipped for trembling. see how the gilded fat slides from the candle! red and gold. seagulls outside. the estate in shrill decline. the morning doubly shrieked. my lust is a landfill. *baby*, as if we gestate the dead. and in the dirty sink, a spider. broken lotus. folded like a guru. how many eyes? a row of them, a band, like gems in an engagement ring. spider, dark tent, guyed and staked. drowsing, gouched. i run the water, rinse her velvet metrics to extinction, half afraid. and still her shimmer clings. the spooling vein runs silver. *baby*, a roomy word, though curled. you poach my fucking proteins. grow large on me. i am mia farrow in *rosemary's baby*, *baby*. if a woman can marry the eiffel tower, then marry me. i'll jump your zombie bones. kiss me on my spreadlegged gender, on my copy of *the nationalist*. we're all going down together. atomically beleaguered world. i picture a comet crashing into the shimmering phlegm of the serpentine.

f

baby,

how to practice the *ethics of forgetting*. mechanic of anxiety, i. you're not the only one, you know. i live in the world with a man with a smile like a crack in a glass; his body, aseptic savour of small hairs. his body, coupled. uncoupled. between *link* and *lack*. poise a pen and threaten permanence; blink and imply *disappear*. i want to cherish what's real, what's near. i was burning a boy like a lean brown candle for years. that's you. we don't forget. we resurrect the dead, conjured out of coffins, white rabbits leaping lucky-footed from a magic hat. he said *you old corpse whisperer, you*. he gave me love, i gave him back these prickling increments of text, the things i summon up by grim nekylia, calling forth in repetitious shifts the dead like nurses. i stretch event until it snaps. modernity, her whole barbarous shebang. for entire swathes of the population death is seldom thought of. *i gave my love a cherry, it had not stones...*

...today i took a long bath and imagined being mary. i was eating oranges, reclassifying planets: to lesser moon, to fruit. i'm mary and i am on the stairs going *oh! oh! oh!* the reeling lustre of spring. feeling fizzy. pithed the atom. iodined the sky. he comes in and i'm all *let's play!* i want to know everything. my eye stoops to the keyhole, my fingers conjure the brush. i'm biting. he is so big in his ozone of fur. i'm running. climbs the stair. calls my name – to no lumbering avail! a bear is slow, with blood like soup. *i'm a shark!* i'm in my swerving element. all teeth, my skin a yet more grievous mouth. madness – unlike naming – is a truth you cannot step in twice...

...jenny says to listen to my body. it has phases, like the moon. and i go *phases of the mood, phrases of the moon* and i grin and she sighs. i put chinese food in my *food diary*. on an upswing i make five pictures of mary barnes as saint mary. when asked what she is the patron saint of i reply with *patron saint of crocodiles!* i have been asked to consider what it means to wear my mary mask but there's no great mystery: i keep her in reserve for when my fran mask becomes intolerable to me. this is often. i watch myself, quietly mystified, as the

fran mask does the shopping, holds forth about franco moretti, and fails to secure funding yet again.

f

9.

baby,

if i move i will explode. stiff. rigid with a nail's ache, inwardly screaming. *drink milk*, it says on the internet, a blank page the body tolerates. not mine. what day is this? what year? i should make some art. should – crayons. a caught and difficult world imprisoned in a tissue like a sneeze. keep it in. that idiot is president and moaning overflows the mouth. an armoured boot, parading on a windpipe for all time. i can't get breath enough, open the house like a swiss army knife, all doors and windows. i want to be smooth as a sucked pebble. clean, if the world can't be. you come out of the night: harbinger, stag mask, irrational with antlers. love, a remnant dread we suck the knuckle of. when there's nothing else left, when there's nothing left.

f

ghost,

not *dear* today. today i am more urgent than tender. spent all day at the hospital with *the portions and parcels of the dreadful past*. we waited around for hours. the pastel drawings dragged their skewed perspective over the eye. their colours mumbled. weak coffee. standing at the window and the view drooped too: gardens with brow-beaten flowers, sulky wending of a bus, edwardian pubs, sexless and bulldozed. here for days. and in the corner shop they grow a migraine cheap. seagulls, parking charges; an orbital town, its sour-polluted pedigree. figures, smoking, paced out against the grey and early light like cockle-pickers. the acid dignity to nurses. i notice things, which doesn't help: menial tea, and vending machines are massive as chaperones. patience is a bone one gnaws, the chapel closed. caffeine, like a finger in a hinge. women, mothers, priggish with woe. the stale air squeaked my vinyl boots. death's shuffling momentum. twisting again, like it did last summer.

f

ghost –

it is past two in the morning. everything's different. i know now there are worse things than losing you: aleppo, in the rubble of its raging thirst, the listless griefs of cancer wards, my niece's thin scream, the nurse with eyes like ashtrays in the i.c.u, the doctor with his goblin word that won't be bargained into meaning, hallways, insensible with slamming doors. but the pillow has become a bowl i overflow. grieving is to mourning what a smoke alarm is to a song.

f

15.

ghost –

a is dead. the black dress is beyond reproach. the family, faces yellow and puffy as water-damaged paperbacks. the wind talks tangledly to hair. the kitchen is imminent with women. they crowd in on me like madness. cold tea is a stone in my mouth. on skype is joe's bad eye, gathering the smoggy light behind it. and behind joe is belfast, the rankled chests of children, cavities, catarrh, the metal scaffolds green with spring's first lurgy. freeze-dried electric dread when joe says how i'm *used* to this. *go to it, girl, you're good at death.* god help me, ghost.

f

ghost,

i wore my *bardcore* t-shirt to therapy today. jenny asked what i would *do* over xmas, but i didn't know. it doesn't matter. i tried to explain about *narrowcasting*, about the poems as public artefacts that move nevertheless with a heat-seeking specificity, a *zeroing in* on their chosen target. it bothers me, though, these strategies of enigmatic exclusion. a pretence, like a striptease through a peephole. and what if i don't write? and what if i don't publish? a bit like being able to turn invisible, but only if no one is watching. who is the audience for this? why do i even need an audience for this? these questions are too big. i've been staring at the screen for so long i've started seeing things: fiacc's face in profile, circa 1977, the word *patience* printed over and over again. perception grates upon the page. i turn the light off, put on the playlist joe made me. i let the music map my body in the dark. out of the window, the street light: one onyx eye adrift. there's my statue from burdes, photos of my dog, tea-lights sugar-coating gloom, the shrine i lift my eyes to. mary's bright, levitates a halo. i'm hollow as a drilled tooth, floating away.

f

ghost,

going out is good, except when it isn't. low barking, orbital gormlessness, a sky infantile with fireworks. we were at the irish centre, wary of each other. kids with faces like anvils of unluck, lip-syncing to a rebel song; old women touting their dowdy affections, and men flourishing paunches like loaves. sore. exhausted. my fucking wrist. again. and somebody tells me to *mind my language*. what language? poetry? which is a belonging to the spaces between the words. i've been thinking: a sin is not an *error* or a *crime*, it is some third thing. today, i have signed my name as a five pointed star and thought about you often. the light comes through the curtains in ugly errant megawatts, and your name crawls across the brain's wet radius. i am writing. i am writing to appease the page with words, with *these* words in particular. is setting down a *drinking in* or *spilling out* of everything i have contained? as in: arcana, fauna, the shrieking etiquette of nurses; lovers who say *you are being hysterical*. i have no answer to this. my wrists, befuddled with ambergris, my hair swept up. dolly bird, a wide-eyed obsolescence in thigh high boots. i have no answer. catatonic lusciousness at eight a.m. it's all that girls are for, grinding my lips like cigarettes against the dirty glass. unlock an unconvincing mirror with a fist. or sleep...

...i want to run away from words. artilleries, militias, whispers. days when even sickness is a slogan in the blood, and i can't hear myself think over the sound of my falling apart. this is real. i do not believe a book can be *brave*. if gàidhlig isn't spoken. if gàidhlig becomes a textbook redhead drenched in freckles, gàidhlig dies. as in: hashtag: aisling pagan toss. as in hashtag: bride of chucky. i have no answer to this. only and not even english, which talks and talks a razor's well-bred elocution. i think about suicide often. i think about *nation, rise!* yes, rise, up on your hind legs, banging a malformed fist on the table. ireland. death's green theatre. and i can't stop thinking. living here, approaching my future with caution, quite prepared to dwindle my shape down corridors to plagiarism and bludgeon, inadequate muster. *fear of a gyp planet!* you said, *academia will eat you alive, and no, poetry won't save you*. this lyric is so much fiddling while they saturate your caravan with fire. this is a thing i already know. and yes, it *is* lonely out here, and yes, i feel like hester dragging a dead swan more days than not. i dream of the dead, their elephant forgetfulness a grave a mile and thirteen wide. i cannot carry them. they are not *held*, dragged into the lung like smoke, they are only spoken

up. and if shelta isn't spoken, if shelta is rocked in the withered grip of southmen, smartarse
artsmen, smugly moneyed; if shelta rots into loam and gloaming, pebble and ferret, the
squirm of handiwork and festival leathercraft, then shelta dies, pining in a reed bed,
gaptoothed in rags and posthumous blotto. i have not been myself of late. damp trampled
grass we wipe our face on. cousin, comrade, golden fleece of the blonde headcount, i am lost to
dye job, slave wage, dental hygiene. help me. the brand new now i'm bound for. *i'll build my
love a bower.* ghosts i yearn and shrink with. you, daddus, martyn, a, r. distemper in the
heather.

f

ghost,

jenny raises a good point: the *you* to whom i write, he is sometimes a child and sometimes a man. he is chronologically unstuck. like doctor who or some such shit. which changes the *i* that writes. sometimes i am fran, who is thirty-odd with chronic back pain and a pit bull terrier, and sometimes i am biddy, all lisping ego in a leather miniskirt. sometimes, younger still, snatching fivers with a silky fist. ghosts inhabit all time simultaneously. the letter is a means of travelling in time. i don't like to think of childhood, though, how our dirty fingers done disservice to a decade. not prayer, the likes of us can only prate our erring birthright. being young was having hearts that follied at their own grim pace, was holding our breath, going to bed unfed and underflourishing. a school with gendered battlements, kept apart. you weren't there to stand up for me. posh girl, pretty with teaselled hair played money's dunce. she wore new shoes and spat on me. i put a dead crow in her bag; the maggots got on everything like white rice at a wedding. *i does magic. don't fuck with me.* girls at school go *terrorist*. and so i am, a pilgrim for grievance, doolittle to the dead, they cling to clothes. dog hair. asbestos in the sinuses. even then, i wasn't normal. saw things, the grinding fault i'm seismic with, and lippy. teacher's beetle-voice in a patchwork skirt. my dandelion eyelash plucked, i make a wish: *fall off a cliff and into the sea*. all talk is teething. cures is for meat. dark out. up in the bedroom, being ticked off. we're holding hands while they're banging on. a hangnail dragging down wet black glass.

f

**La deuota Rappresentazione di San Martino
Uelcouo, e Confessore,**

Nuouamente stampata.



gentle reader poems

—

who are you, anyway? who am i talking to? who are we ever talking to? days when you might reinvent god because your own voice sounds so hollow in your head. my head. gentle reader, then. omniscient bitch, dirty fucking voyeur. but what would that make *me*? i read this article about the way dogs develop object permanence, but cats don't. people think cats are *so* clever, but they don't understand that if you put the food in the cupboard the food still exists. stupid cats. but i think there are some people like that. they assume that when you're not right in front of them you've been folded up and placed into cold storage. when i was little i used to believe that the world was constructed scene by scene as i walked down the road. apparently most children do. it's psychotic. but most children are psychotic. it doesn't count as a warning sign. anyway, now it's different. i have object permanence. things exist without me and away from me. but maybe i lean too far in the other direction: i imagine people and objects are still here when they've manifestly vanished. all these places and people, floating in a state of dislocated suspense, arrested in a no-time, not unlike biblical limbo, only less preachy. m is there, and m, and the flats that got tore down. and daddus. and everyone. so, whack fol la de dah!

gentle reader,

a book might be opened, a letter's only ever broken into. i know this now: to each action its own particular weight; to each object its own particular friction. so what does this poem amount to? gentle reader, dotter of my every eavesdropped *i*. i have given you this; we consummate a censorship. i have been saying over and over: *this isn't for you*. a poem isn't shared, a poem's only ever stolen. or else -. what? the eye, inflicted frontier, forced to see against its will. poem in full-frontal peek-a-boo. *undignified*, the gadje aunt has spoken. such private pain in a public space. i am a weak person, lose my voice in rooms, in groups, can't muster a watery wherewithal, so tired of giving up his name to strangers, of making strange his name in giving up. who is it who belongs to *martyn* anyway? gentle reader, co-conspirator, you read and you are fraternised, *associated*, guilty. you have *given comfort to the enemy*. and no, no, no, this isn't confessional, this isn't a confession, i am without shame. mad bitch who lives inside of shivering, in half-eaten afternoons, trailing her tattery teary-eyed slang. you are permitted to know this: a homeless boy with no front teeth, but clear, keen eyes like bubbles in glass. long day, and low, and taking my own unstable ingenuity to talks. and a girl says *integrity*, conjures both truthful and whole. but i have only this, words, a fractured and jaggedly sallying truth. neurotic opportunist, i, imperfectly socialised, squatting in disarticulate limbo, grinding my teeth with a bone through my nose. this public self parades a shabby pain for show – and tell. but what is *shown*, and who is *told*? poems, improbably polished turds – wet links of shit falling out of a dog. that is, poems, metabolised and mediated: processed. not this. intrusive thought could stretch a freckle into cancer..

...to leave a room and walk into improvised sunshine, and thinking of him, and his smile like a slowly closing door. this is the life that the books and their sanitised wingspans are waiting to trap inside of them. travelling back. seagulls are a soundtrack to a landfill. home has a footbally fondness about it. there is arabica and porcelain, the low moral wastes of england; farage's mouth as a misconnected cistern. *farage*, *farrage*, *far-right rage*, implying both *barrage* and *farrago* simultaneously. london, larcenous and brittle, in an atmosphere of pork gelatine, accumulated soap scum and power outage. england, you've refined your manners but you haven't changed your mind. the radio, its brutalised transmission. petrochemical gloaming. reading hannah, hannah, hannah who is also a saint, a prophet of infertility. thinking *art as a straight line*, thinking that *a tree with no branches is a fucking*

stick, any which way you slice it. you are permitted to know this, gentle reader. you are permitted to know: i am a member of the *protest movement*. there's a file on me, and here is another: this poem. tell all and reveal nothing. the paranoid predicament of activists. yes, but you *are* out to get me, gentle reader. i sent for what they held. such idiocy: *republican sinn féin*. as if there's any other kind, and if you have nothing to hide you have nothing to fear. and if you have nothing. nothing but fear. it was a choice some weeks between soap and bread. and now, and now, poem as some maladjusted algorithm, a digital footprint, skimmed and culled, my cudgelled data divvied up by institutions: prospective employers, credit bureaus, mental health outreach teams, and you, dear reader. you know too much about me now: how his image thrives the eye, fattened on light; how the record won't sit still, too full of hairline fidgets, these disconnected thoughts: *some of these days you'll miss your honey – some of these – – you know you're gonna – – sweet baby, i'll be going away...* how love is soluble in static. this also is life. i am trying hard to be here. five a.m. was spent with my hand inside a carrier bag; the train journey doted on lyric indiscretions. picture *this*, why don't you, blondie: each fissure in flesh a dead letter drop; his oblong wounds force-fed blue white paper. yes, picture *this*: his oblong wounds, redacted, mathematical, long divisions, erasures where my name should be. what? is that too much? you are interested in tragedies, not grotesques...

gentle reader,

they say *where are you going?* beyond a joke and dressed as a mermaid! monday, the fictions are filing their teeth. i don't know you, but i remember *being* you. know what i mean? monday, and i'm sharing this headache with strangers. it's the only way. and i'm a *nightmare* now, my mouth is a glass house gathering stones, stoned and phobic, sertraline *for days*. suture my mood with invisible stitches, god. god is a cheshire cat with a chelsea smile. i'm a headless doll with a pentagram gash, hung upside down from a talking tree, all disney after dark. i look good in this dress. my underwear is a victimless crime. no v.p.l. does my brain look big in this? lookit me, i'm missus mcbride! i'm doing a stream of consciousness at you! should i tell you i want to kiss you, reciprocally askew at some shit-up-a-burning-rope awards event? no, that i want to suck the wine stains from your pencil skirt. no, that i want to eat you. and i mean like a shark, my bite radius is a dangerous halo, pillow of teeth and holy! holy! holy! *where are you going?* oh, i don't know. depression is a drum solo of long standing and in this house the dials go up to eleven. everyone's so happy, and life is just this one big sunshiny clusterfuck. are you a poet? if so, oh engine of abundancies, remake me in your image! here is my very best effort: an unsolicited witchcraft. straight to video! tales from the fucking slush pile! i remember being you. monday, when i contemplate my life i get *the static*, ominous, like a spasm in a snowglobe. and *they* can't take me anywhere. i persecute the nudes in a white museum, cararra marble, a circus of veins i'd break a hammer on. poet, cure me of militant skincare. this haunted tendency of mine is my most implacable form of love. writing these letters makes me feel like a stalker. christ, give me a strict truth i can teach to, a tune i can hum. everything is *so* complicated now. i am *so* tired. automatic with exhaustion, i say *yeah, fine, i'd love to!* to numerous things, then live to regret them. tumescent cretins follow me on public transport everywhere. girl sat opposite, cracked commemorative plate for a face, is reading a magazine. she is reading about the decorative orifice: bleached anus, lacquered lip, a woman is a ceremonial hole with straightened teeth. i'd like to regale you with the sea shanty i made from all of my failures. arguable martyrdom. *you can't make babies, so what's the point of you?* i cried for days, it's a great way to lose weight! i'm shallow now, as a pawprint in wet grass. should i say something creepy? i haven't dreamt about you for weeks, but don't take it to heart, i defaced the play-park near your house. monday, the promiscuous monotony of *being* a girl, in whoever's skin. a dog with ears like arrowheads is

taking revenge on the world. and i am with him. no one will ask me *where are you going?* the pilgrims in wristbands all crooning for christmas. the river, my mirror, your face swims towards me. i've gone to make placebo out of drowning. or down to the shops. whatever.

gentle reader,

there is no writing without my writing *to*. and so, i am addressing you. jenny says *tell* someone, *tell* anyone. if not her then *write it down*. pretend there is a single *gentle reader*, of omniscient understanding, like god, that fatuous catholic agony aunt. very well, then. how to describe my day? how to say this haunting consists of earache from the infrasound. spite, dear reader, is the succour of hunchbacks. all our lives we have paid attention to the wrong details. *all of the time*? yes, all of the time. i have to admit to days i've been exorbitantly dolorous. i could crack open my lungs in a saucer, reading the contents like cold tea dregs. *unaccustomed as i am to making speeches* i have to tell you this: there's a woman on the tube, opposite me, with false nails so long she can't use her smartphone. some people will tell you this is what is meant by *suffering for your art*... those people are cunts. i find it very hard to be interested in the catalogue-come-lookbooks of other people's lives. oh hey, aggrandised sandwich! eventual turd of the underdog! i am only *like bill* in the sense that sometimes i am a line drawing, that i have no body but an angle of ascent. sometimes. mostly i'm better. except when i'm not. and who's this obscure pain in the balls, styling the stains on his cowboy coat? friend request: delete. friend request: delete. life, oh life, through a retro lens. artwad girl got *loads* money. hashtag: halcyon mediocrity. i mean it, i know i'm hardly a fine one to judge, but the girls who go round and around inventing a geography from cheekbones. lipstick. eyeliner. shiny, shiny hair. wanly immaculate girls on the internet. urgh. like that scout from premier who said they'd pay to get my teeth *fixed*. like the nurse who said she admired my *willpower*. like the boy who said *it's like fucking a toolkit*. and if you're not part of the solution – then what? i can't wait for everything to be over. catastrophe's the next best thing to christmas. here's real life again, gifting a thistle to your face. fens and the family drama. in tip for the summer with my moral dysmorphia. i might *eat men like air*. if i ate. and i feel my mind go *snap!* like the strap on a ballet pump. *snap!* like a fan belt. madness, dear reader, is the *last refuge* we've been mistaking prayer for all along. no i wouldn't like a drink and i don't need anybody's pity. dead white tree like a hand of glory. i too have tapers ablaze at my fingertips. they are visible, though, only to me.

gentle reader,

redacting a dark eye with liquid liner. *how do i love you, let me count the ways!* i'd like to smash against your midriff like a bottle of champagne. how's that for narrative fucking entanglement? it's not *quite nice* to say such things, but tonight i am a peacock, preening myself in a fever dream, and we should've been sisters. could've been. just picture it: little girls, experts in the artifice of sanctity, suggestible poppets with braided hair, blowing our precocious candles out on cue. i wish i had a sister. i have a shadow, but she's thinner than me so i basically hate her. oh, you'll never guess who i bumped into at the hospital? the fucking swan maiden! she wore her mouth like a plumb cartouche, a seal you'd break to wake the dead, to set off blood-thirsty booby traps. i don't know if she'd been visiting himself or was just there to have her fangs milked. she asked me what my ph.d was on and i told her i apply rouge to the blank page like a gifted mortician, that i go the park when the weather's excavating ravens, rooks, crows, and watch a gif of henry rollins screaming into the face of a terrified nerd for hours at a stretch. art, you bitch! i saw a youtube video of her on my phone. she's perfect. she has a voice like injured purring, a big cat at the back of her throat, some velvet ancestor loose in her genes. i sieve her soundbites for hidden meaning. *my* words are gauntly militarised. they poke up awkward from any human fist. like fire. shrapnel. keys clutched in the dark. some combustible ague coughing up dust. extreme heat. i read that radiation travels faster than the speed of light, and so, even if we leave london, we're all fucked. tuesday. in a tiered dress like a tall clock, playing my records, rampantly analogue. tachyons marching backwards through time in vintage heels, wearing dayglow fallout like a chiffon scarf. if it is *the end of the world as we know it*, my particles can bump and grind with yours.

gentle reader,

days i just miss him, familiar deliciousness, his face. i want what i can't have, because i can't have it. his arms are illustrative discipline. big mac and his busy ink have left him so *ridiculously* delft. his beauty is a kind of sumptuous deformity, the way certain shades of blue are a sumptuous deformity. his light travels slanted, gets the better of the spectrum. yes, his *particular shade of blue* is the shadow cast by all solemn things. i spent a good sixty minutes this morning arguing with an-cap zombies on the internet. what does that say about me? i look at his picture to calm myself. blue, when certain shades of blue are a punishment for something, when *being* blue is being born to wallow in our deepest emergency, when *seeing* blue is a form of patience. stasis. absolute paralysis. sincerest form of flattery. arrested blue, oh god, to be the blind cartographer who mapped his still trembling terrain. i mean, the tattoo still acute, illicit forger's blue. familiar deliciousness, his flesh. more needles than the lonesome pine. *i* pine. i want his tattoo. it's not the art but the pain, the hook and drag, a minute private vice i bathe myself all over with like ass's milk. mosquitoes, artisans, little vampires, drink me dry! it's wednesday and i'm down, i wear a covert hunger in the eye, always in the eye, in this unspeakable blue not of my choosing. i want him, and the world. his word for god, a mute consuming of the skin. plant his name in me to see what red event might hatch. okay, breathing deeply, make my detrimental inventory: *i'm* still here, etc, etc. a dark thought persistently stifled. depression's glum concussions, day after day after day after -. i saw him in hellfast, feral and elect of god, derailing a vacant stare in the supermarket. i love him. my poems are flying monkeys and i send them out to bring him home. addiction *is* obsession says the doctor, and sickness the ultimate language of flowers. i give you this, it's free: the horror i am vomity and silent with. i am holding my suffering up next to yours like a dress i do not dare try on. love me, as i love, every inch his unswimmable blue.

gentle reader,

thursday, i emerge into daylight blinking, superimposing my lips on a peach. to taste without eating, to this we aspire. i am not yet thin enough to regard myself without disgust. i bake without tasting: arks of honeyed sponge, joints of walnut coloured meat, immense as trojan horses. *you* would not do such things, i'll bet. *you'd* tell the non-vegan world where to hang itself. there is no duty in you, but *my* heart is religious, my heart is a very voluptuous wound. thursday, these are my thoughts, but i'll go outside where my thoughts can't follow. attending to all the vegetable commotions of the earth, the light, bowing backwards out of the forest and bitten by dogs. all day the weeping of others has eaten holes in my clothes like moths, now i am thoroughly ragged. at any one time three people i care about deeply are dying. it is no longer an event. don't expect or ask for things from me, i am aiming at sleep, not sainthood. the exhaustive mercy of holy people does nothing for me: *my door is always open*. but this is never true. anyway, there is no *crisis*. there's a patient disaster that swallows everything. an iceberg with a mouth, dear god! they are their own implausible planets. i eat their many gravities like sand.

gentle reader,

i'm good at hate. monday night, i want to turn this irksome century with a spade. i'm done, i said, quite polished off. no stars that i can see, and i've stared long enough. i'd like to uninstall this sky, crash and wipe, and sack it till its default bleeds. now ask a stupid question. how are you? i'm fine. i trail degraded regret, this unreal pain, on a long lead, like a tactical dog. lowbrow growling melancholia. the water tastes of soap and ptomaine. leek and potato soup. today, i've wrestled with my mental gremlins, lost, and still gone on. that's progress, ain't it? my phases ache. i'm good at hate. it gets inside and shakes me like an eight ball. i cried today. a parade in the town: armed forces, militant kids, cadets. i cried, at their khaki and territorial patois, smooth boys babyfaced with retribution; the tattooed paras in berets and medals. their guns. i couldn't stand it, *lost my shit*. i see the paper fortune folded up inside each one. *death*, i mean, the big whoop. i cringe and croak, i'm stooping like a flightless bird. misery comes to heckle my feathers. i cannot knead this fat dread into friction, or take off into a narcotised sky. i'm not a bird. i'm a storybook wolf with a stone in its belly. i'm shaking like a busted tumble dryer, and people are staring... *...fly away home*. from an early age i knew you couldn't get revenge on animals, squaddies the same. a moist boy kissing my mouth. hope as a facet of frenzy. the body, pubescent debris, puking my guts until i bled. fucking disgusting, digs his fingers into me like wet sand. i'm good at hate. monday night, and no, i will not see the funny side. a trick is not a joke. that morning i declared myself a scene of crime, cornered the sprawl of me in the dark, put my finger on the problem – right on. it has its own pulse. god, i was sick. there are times i could teach a class on such things. the whole city hangs on its hinges. weak sun, defective metal. nobody wants what i could teach: the face, ugly with rinsed abandon, sucking up the downhill struggle of the streets, gives back despair in spades. binge and purge and binge and purge and now – relax. forgive me, but oh, for a better *home* than this. the *true home*, its homilies and feuds. no. not there. not anywhere. just learn to live in the barbital hollow of self, bedouin, your flesh a tent, a caravan, a caravanserai. *learn to live*. man is made for finite writhing; assault and obstacle, a tide of bones. *do something positive*. and i gave half my money to rape crisis england. it didn't help. direct action vs passive resistance. i'll march, for all the good that does. i mean, i'll march for all the good. what's left? processional dissidence. usurping a function of government. *tory scum, here we come*. black bloc lock to the rescue! we muster this, a generation doomed and countered. there's *force*,

then there's *coercion*. i'm banging my head off a fine distinction, courting the floor with my face. a child is pioneering screams in the house next door. manifest gangland, staffies, dross, and uncontained mayhem. it's where we live now. no. wait. it was me who was screaming. i don't have this nightmare often: those soldiers in the centre. full dress. horse brass. it's their right to run through someone's life like a broken comb through tangled hair. i'm good at hate. what you stand for. what you stand by. a frieze of fists, stop-frame technique, the way everything breaks into spasm and fatigue. this fear is what i'm manic with. today. days like today. and that is the mischief of it. the brain is a brick through a window. an empty house you can slap with your hand. haunted. i turn in, and – there is memory, regaling our reason with horrors, apologies, nonsenses. i freeze to my factory settings. teeth on edge, metallic taste. bring me water, a cup with which to drain the world. i've swallowed it all. i've gagged. i've swallowed everything.

gentle reader,

each day must learn how to be terrible. we wait for our world to be eaten by greenness. spring, so-called. so cold. i sort the minor arcana of ideation: risperidone, razor, *enough fucking rope*. i'm swollen with groaning awe at a sunrise, at the sight of myself so emphatically pink. the glass in the window is broken, and i'm on a fickle collision with longing. with longing, yes, with the law, and myself. i hate this town. an ambiance of wet umbrellas, dog shit, the ghost of hannah weiner in a devastated tea dress. my alphabet all x today, and headless, cantering to ravages, to merry hell without the merry. drug me de rigueur, all white and drawling, about to be violently goth. why not? everybody hugging at the knucklebones of suicides. why not mine? not me? with my unworth and my asthma. i've been typing so long the printed page becomes a flea circus. the vision breaks, into impatient piecemeal, eczemas, bedbugs. artificial light; the antisocial sparkle of a migraine. a dog with an elastic bark, stretching to its limit then rebounding off the houses. i hate this town. quick fix with pills. the radio is writing an anthem to medicinal epiphany. what do they know, those kids? cobain, curtis, a note torn from their spiral binding flutters like a damsel's hanky. what do they know? stubbled, gutless, gone in soft-boiled beery fury. dead white men of genius. there are spiders behind the brown recycle bin. sadness, trough of limbic pixels. the heart will wheeze its stolen fire. little fix with pills. big pills to bless yourself. even bigger pills like jade netsuke. i angle for an afterthought, to be somebody's afterthought. i am fluent in dread, and the walls are closing in. days learn too how to be terrible. drunk and listing at the vigil, bury me in acker, kocot, minnis, myles. fully upholstered in poetry. my agonies are talismans. i wear my brash beloved trauma like a beret. see? i walk through a storm of vitamins and cigarettes. paramour with laura palmer eyes. the curtains close the tepid undertow to blackout. *dream a little dream of me*. or not of me. the flower of my toothy logic. make wikipedia from petals. flytrap. stamen. pelts and wounds. and all the colours you can't name in bloom inside the silence.

gentle reader,

downloading your enormity has taken me an age. friday is a horror show. you persecute me softly, like a cat. i have thirty-eight messages in my inbox, my meeting was a disaster and my house is a tip. i do not do the self-effacing virtues of femaleness. inaccurate dream in which i am loved, the *apple of my father's eye*, or anyone's. or else i'm waging a dangerous fate in an eyepatch, a latter day gráinne o'malley in thigh-high pirate boots. i often dream of the sea, offer up my unrequited sleep in lieu of love. i mount and rise, fall back upon myself in mutilated waves. i purge my scurvy lusts on peaks of broken colour. the sea is what we understand by *permanence*, unholy and fixated blue. the sea is an ugly wisdomless depth, extends to us no cure, no care. it is to the sea that i return in my dreams, the sea as a mouth, not an eye. i am sorting myself into tendrils and splinters, a wreck of a thing neither fathomed nor gleaned. friday, our luck is *pure*, not *good*, it chases us. it trips us, traps us, tricks us. i could saw myself in half. death by self-made magic trick! a million billion bats bursting out of my abdomen, unfolding themselves like canvas lawn chairs in the street outside my window. or my body's full of bugs. or sawdust. or tutti-frutti chewits. my suicidal ideation takes the form of stylised cartoon violence. it's no less real for that. i can't deal with my family today. please tell my cousins that xmas is cancelled, the tree has packed up its nooses and stupid hoop earrings, and grown, soaring, through a hole in the roof. i'm coming apart like a three stage rocket and the whole house is collapsing.

gentle reader,

posh spice bought me a black spiral bound notebook with the words *believe you can* on the front. i'm supposed to use it at uni. it already drew a sneer from mister digital humanities, but fuck him, frankly. i might not believe i can anything but i like the idea of being spiral bound, spiral prone, inclined to spiral. twenty-seven in the shade. mouths unstick themselves like envelopes steamed open. dark-haired girl in dungarees shakes with breakup's maudlin palsies, cries into her mobile phone: *i really loved him, mum...* and i have all the willpower of a lynch mob, an unsuccessful temperament. need sugar. black bubbles raise my carbonated mood. stunted trees, collecting soot like old, abandoned crutches. i could drink an ashtray dry. i want to smoke. boys in peaked caps, kissing. lank boy breaks in grimy waves across his lover's pink inertia. i want mícheál so badly i could punch holes in concrete, his hands squeaking on me like rubber sponges. i remember. early evening is the austerity of indifferent pleasures, no proof against fools. boys in the renoir: *do you want company?* psychosis comes, its farcical malignancy. i am funny to myself. funny ha-ha, funny-*funny*. madness, my vaudeville volition. the body longs to take a skeletal direction. desire crumbles like a tooth. desire to live. desire to *be* desired. his wounds are like lagoons, like swimming pools. clear and diveable. i cannot navigate paralysis, i am sinking, drowned. i tell myself i need to move, get up, but i can't. the graveyard is unpacking its mattresses. the trees are unpacking their pollens. in a starlinged light that scrapes the green from the trees, i am thinking of him. i hold a mirror to this moment as you would hold a cigarette to skin. side by side, our narrow backs were white, invulnerable butterflies, or else he measured the length of himself in an asphyxiated stairwell, conquered broken bottles like a general. i remember. twenty-seven under nine p.m.'s black parachute. a morbid thought bears down like a night bus. the hot exhaust you huff instead of glue. blue moon, in blister-packed enormity, swooning in a shot glass. blood's slow endeavour. a fox screaming, broken crows, bent back on themselves like dismembered bibles. the delicious elasticity of flesh. susceptible adrenaline. dopamine runs interference, perfects misinformation in a kiss. but nobody else is mícheál. i am running. practice my fake laugh into the long pauses between words. there's a bridge over a trough of lilies; a beaded eyebrow arching over a meltdown.

dear biddy,

oh halleluah, indecorous and moody fates we couldn't shrug this year of dogs and bottles. diminished breed, and winter, worth its weight in crumpled tissues. earworms, thready pulses, medical conjecture, friends are unaccounted for. fate, soft-mouthing our tender extremities. our spiritless cameos in other people's grief: aleppo, the ocean, etc, etc. some, cupping gin like an injured bird, wondered aloud at the world. men's hands were everywhere: moths seeking sanctuary in sleeves of summer dresses. death is a red dress meme on the net. no one is responsible for anything. oh, but take heart. there are improbable survivals, victories: the morning's trenchant splendorings, red sky waxing militant; flame raisins steeped in apple juice and cinnamon. there is music, like a lush peach bitten through, arriving from aarhus via camden. the spangled unlikely: jack's tattoo, melissa mounting fairy lights above the kitten grotto. defiance, art, a kindness of ravens, arriving like emails all at once, a glossy black that breaks apart and lifts your mood. improbable survivals: a palmed coin and a forced card, unicorn accessories, sorceries, a formidable hat, and obviously... dogs. there are times our tribe still gathers, carries each other like light bulbs. or better yet is marty at cheltenham, making the middle-class ladies cry. and here comes roddy lumsden, stood in the sturdy hush of the betsey, meant and grand. they now serve coffee. amen to all of that.

gentle reader,

saturday. i cannot run, can merely move my legs like left-handed scissors. and anyway, there will be no escape, from muffled rooms where light is tidied into bars and heaps, where we must sit amidst the contemplative excess of little england. the girl-child wears her most incessant face, and i should be gathering hawthorn from the hedgerows. their ways are not our ways. my deviant grief, no feathers only fur, succumbs to a classical urge to tear my hair out at the roots, and i resort to all this shrieking default in my dreams. here i must be calm. love is our most *mortal* extravagance. but love is a force we feed into absence. something. someone. crumbs fall to the floor. teacups settle themselves into dainty saucers for the long wait. girl-child is angelic with competitive divinity. she wants to be witnessed like a violent crime. as do we all. recorded and invoked. i have also desired to be the heart's last luminous sentry, exalting the eye, to be the bearer of a laden name they throw their arms around. ah, fame. i throw myself away from myself instead, precisely nauseated. i'll renounce both dreams and seasons altogether. saturday, a day girls spend susceptible and binging, heroically appalled at the world and its retreating seas. make coffee, express my own self-conscious safety, demurely, on the internet. *you have no money, and you can't have children, and no one will ever love you.* there is freedom in this, though. my freedom arches its spine, is a cat-headed goddess of spiral pursuits whose shining edict is song. her name is *virgina fur*, and her first commandment is to grasp. oh, that i should regret nothing, that my scarred white back should retract its knives! saturday, the girl-child knows what everything costs, she has a complexion of scrimshawed bone. girlhood. our narrow truce. the future reproaches us: it is the crutch that cripples you. burn everything. embroider your longing onto the air. we should seek things like the wind does, not go about exquisitely spurned, believing in tales that will never come true. hope is nose-ring gone septic, kids, is a telenovela all creaky with antiquated yearning, polyester dresses, the claquing homage of a studio audience. nobody needs it. tedious theme tune. ugliness: it might just be the highest form of courage. walk out devastated, scale a hill of bones, wear a senseless gown, a gold tiara. what's our name again? okay, repeat this after me, i will say this only once –

gentle reader

maybe i don't deserve to exist. at the big event some fuckless thoroughbred said *i saw you at the blah blah blah, you were reading your book about blah*, and i had to tell her that wasn't me. i don't like poetry very much. it's a goddamn regency zoo, and big events are worse. sometimes my life is a deleted scene from a psychotic episode directed by ken russell. by which i mean all strenuous technicolour, by which i mean i'm sick of being courted by determinedly eccentric men. for the once first last and final future time, *drop dead!* it's not enough to see you fail, they want to see you bleed. and if not frequently mistaken for the beauteous lady x at pompous awards ceremonies, what would my life amount to? all day yesterday, i was singing a song in a windowless room. the rumours are true, and i have been striving for zero, trying to achieve the aristocratic stillness of a statue in a hedge maze. the most i've managed is the infiltration of size eight jeans, a slight stoop, and a skin condition. i was watching another youtube video of the swan maiden doing poetry at people, she wriggled into a tight pacific light. she was parallel parking a big word, and looking out from under her matte foundation. i thought, *i could get the long fingers of one hand right round her neck*. i thought, *i could wear her in my buttonhole, the silly bitch*. you see, i'm not a nice person. i wasn't made for lisping whimsy, or being loved, or having kids, nor for your classical pathologies, the extrovert disastrophy of know-it-all poetism. hey, i can only be adored in a certain light, with a brutal simplicity. killing a poet is like killing a cockroach, you can cut off the head but the body goes on reprising its bump and grind long into the depths of a nuclear winter. you've got to stamp us out with a literal-minded boot, or else turn your house into a tent revival, swimming in fumes. holy smoke! perverse survivalists, poets. i am equally to blame in this. and maybe i don't deserve to exist. it's dark outside. i'm arranging my gaunt rejoinders into emails: *you seem to have mistaken me for lady x. i'm the one with the underweight oozing brogue, with a mirthless laugh like a falling piano. she has the necklace of human ears, and a private tar pit under her bed. i suggest you refer to your spotters' guide and try again later when you've had more practice. yours sincerely, girlgang member in a satin jacket, sworn enemy of all swan maidens.*

gentle reader,

friday meditates a mood like salt. the sky repeats its pigeons. a green eye crawls with keenness. october's tottered logic; a thought first mulled then scorned. the tube train's scowling lull between kings cross and by-bow. i have to go. i don't know where. away. and shun the glum lusts of men, of boys. my zigzag symptoms pinball me from station down to station. *she was in a bad way...* gratuitously capable, the conversation rolling on. i don't want to disappear, but no, i don't belong. side of the road, a dead bird all bones, like a glass slipper i might try on; might dress myself inside of. ugly girl, my tousled pouting will not save me. pale as a chalk horse. the long face that's fit for sugar cubes. it is *correct* to kill yourself when yourself amounts to this. when you're less than no one, trailing your brain round a pastel room for hours and hours, or pining in a pharmacy, insisting your prescription in fluorescent light and seasonal refrain. no poetry will come of this, depression's black lagoon, a burial at sea. this place, a scavenger's fathom, that blinder depth you crawl, nautically mortified, courting the treacherous stealth of eels, worms, parasites – until – you are a clean hinge of skin. a wrinkle in the water. i know this well. lesser flotsam in the swill. no poetry will come of this. there is nothing to say. their talk traverses rooms like spiders, crochets membranes in dark corners. nothing. there is nothing to know. or mean. defeat's own sturdy gravity. the compass in my gut that walks me. tower hamlets. buildings divvied into butcher's cuts like rationed meat. i'm nowhere prime. trapped between the gristle and the rib. i want a dark basement. no more, clinician. no more of your malnourished absolutes. remake myself with rhinestones or with violets. or no, i don't mean that. i mean to change my name, regress, ingrown like nails or teeth. burst the skin of me with me. with poison's sharp aplomb, a sting.

~~gentle reader~~— dear mary,

mary barnes was mad at kingsley hall. i go to kingsley hall with my camera and stand outside in the rain. weird prosaic space i want to mesh with. not now, then. you can hire it. think: site specific installation. not a reading, not my work, just me, staging a breakdown in the corner, painting my breasts with shit. i keep a box of cuttings, the other mad i might draw strength from. i read your book, dear mary. i was hoping for an archive, but there isn't one. i *really* want my work to speak to yours. i try and get at why that is important to me. i imagine some lost sorority, if i have *foremothers* then they are from the nation state of madness. an occulture allowed to flourish because it is ascribed no value. sometimes i do not know who is speaking. i'm just a girl, soft flesh compelling penetration; soft flesh, constructively crippled: *pretty*. all names are diagnosis: *sexy*. a fuckable dunce with perfect teeth. i take all women into myself in grimacing kinship. i love them all, mary. i love them all because they do not love us. no one can love the things they name: *mad bitch, skinny bitch, fucking headcase*. diagnosis, a list of amenable diseases: *anorexic, schizoaffective, psychotic-depressive*. in their world pain's a symptom, not a cause. i've been up for days, my eye a lens intent upon red light. precocious with calamity, i tip that light towards me, post your letter under the door.

dear mary,

addressing prayers to you like a saint. we have this religious impulse in common. you wanted to be a nun also. today i'm chronic youth, incoherent object, grandiloquent with sequins. the forecast is a frozen hell we'll skate upon like children. recite a skinny poem to a crowd of nonplussed haircuts. undiminished melancholy. eyes like plumbs. hair dye under finger nails. and hippy crack round here in spades. i've been thinking about drowning myself, taking to the sea like a regency lady takes to her bed. pull the blue endeavour over me. i'm trying to write about my *process*. calibrating graves. inclined to campfires. wood smoke. apples bruised by heat. *unsustainable lifestyle*. thin. reclining on a tightrope, imprisoned in a paperweight, in a pencil skirt, in a state school talking. all those heedless syllables. insomnia, chic with misadventure. fictional with scissors. emetic mouth i staunch a kiss on. cold. it's very cold. omnivorous sob eats everything. drinks everything. a girl that overwhelms them like a flood. like the flu. fucking's velvet drudgework. swaddled in the spotlight. finalised by *bad misfortune*. incoherent object. rained for weeks. row after row of diamonds in bands. friends are getting married, show you fingers you could suck the skin off. crackling. a resuscitated radio. *i think she's laughing*. i write to you, handwritten relish in a blue pen. stilted thrill of winter, dyslexic with lights. tincture. litmus. synthetic reverie. this means forever. that's alright.

gentle reader,

gussied up for author photo. publisher tells me that *everything is image*, or that *image is everything*. one of the two. and here it is, the body's abstemious jetlag: thirteen years of comedown in a blonde no gentleman prefers. dog-whistle blonde with myra hindley eyes. a blonde who shells the bombs. *i'll dye it black*. red. fuchsia. blue. i want you to know: this is not *the poetics of female experience*. urgh, as if. this is the new war poetry. sorry: war *on* poetry. don't you dare misunderstand me. angry today. purple smoke. yes please, to fumigate a rotten mood. i am ready for my close up. the inconsolable psychodrama of *being* a girl the camera, digesting blemishes. i can't *do femininity for shit*. my body eats itself in ravenous epithelial melee. the stomach wall wincing in vinegar backwash. the brain in its militant giddiness, invents rejections daily. if i get a ph.d. if i rip out my face like a remodelled kitchen. then? pursed, not pouting, the mouth will incubate a mess of straightened teeth. how many books do you have to sell? i'm crunching the numbers like ice-cubes. here it is, the self, aesthetics of a stain. *scrubbing up*. the pain in my lower abdomen. the coralised dejection of a womb gone fallow and foul. premeditated emptiness, a hunger that will kill you in the end. all my sullied filaments, itching, scratched and stunted. the hotwired nerve, gone blackened at the tip. there's what you *see* and what you *show*. bookish. irksome and savant. a poem's miraculous tendency. unwashed. dishrag cognition. contrive a smile from coughing. the body builds a *voice* from sneezing fits. from vitrified paralysis. my brittle eccentricity. the flashbulb reels around my cheekbones. lift my chin. don't hunch my shoulder. lean into the literal-minded lens. singled out for mute invisibility. killjoy and conjured with. a girl isn't *formed*. conspire her into life from everything she's half of. take a badge from my leather jacket. scratch this oval out – like so, like so.

gentle reader,

tell me again, if i'm so *very, very*, why was it her, and why not me? look, i look to you for answers. all of my strong male role models went out with the rife mess of spring in 1983. my father, less a man than a line in the sand. dead, i said, and you are alive, so riddle me this: i have a – what now? mild fame, like a breeze on the back of a neck? no, not even. j and i were discussing the west, how it expands desire like a mouth accommodating chrome, yeah, like a suicide sucking a gun. it is a disaster. *theft is the anvil upon which all culture is pounded*. forgive me, for the tethered dread that tugs like a small balloon inside. i saw my book on a shelf in the lrb and felt obliged to make a pronouncement of some kind. i don't want to look stupid to you, to j. to anyone, but to you least of all of anyone. anyone. here we are then, being *serious*. but i am not like that girl with her own ozone of cleverness. i've only the low cunning one wears like a hairnet to work! she's the same age as me, you know. why wasn't it me? isn't it me? it's never me. i was a summer baby: shaggy, leonine, massive head. summer is a foetal season, blurs what should be sharp. i wanted winter, severest sense of freedom, the thin lapels of asphodels, bespoke and twitching. i used to posh my voice because i thought i had to – forgive me westie. forgive me stoney. forgive me slievenamon – when i started out, i mean, those fucking fucked abyssal days, the rain, crisp scent of failure. why? i was oddment, figment, born all wrong. yes. i chased things, misremembered, courted the seared maze of my blood with tiny violence. this white flower, this garret beacon was all my cipher, a toy bloom which withering signifies home. i wanted svelte infamy, to bend my polymer body to modish grace, new breed. but no, never. you will always swing back on you. the pain will swing, an eight ball to the face. she is lovely, prepping her plenty with smiles, with similes, with pints and quips. she has won at life, and i, i am *dotter of my father's i*, by which i mean peonies, grazes, shank, turf, south london, the agonies of wormy dogs, things that don't matter to j, to r, to anyone. my face droops like a uniform. there are days i am a diagram of the female body. my uterus, an inverted pentagram. *somewhere between solace and perversion hangs all art*. we were talking about london, the plump dazzle of firm fruit, city women, the things we fear. everything, as far as i'm concerned. i want to run around with a megaphone, denounce all the mummies in the british museum. why not me? i kick my heels, want to be real, made real, made new. but no, baby jane, chain smoked to crazytown. no podium can hold me. i will never say: *i would like to thank everybody who has boiled off my skin like a pearl*

*potato, choked on a book like a fishbone; burnt my taigy head in effigy, or wished for my death
with a wishbone.*

~~gentle reader~~ dear jenny,

gentle reader, i suppose it is to you that i am writing in reality. you asked me why. that's a ten quid question. what's the big idea about the *letter* anyway? a place where lament, confession and complaint converge, and where different kinds of privacy intersect and reconstruct themselves. that's the academic answer. what it is really – what it really is – i don't know. you tell me, it was your idea. a boundaried practice, that nevertheless crosses the borders i cannot – temporal, geographical, moral, mortal. today my supervisors asked me the same question you did, or a version of it. martyn's note. or lack of it. am i writing into the silence he left behind? does his lack of finalising text imply somehow, or offer, the possibility of continued communication? what if there *was* a note? what about all the other notes? what about writing responses to all the other notes? an archive. an anthology. it's painstaking work, fastidious and repulsive, like unpicking stitches. anyway, the suicide note extends the possibility of disclosure, but it never discloses. it promises resolution, but remains, in fact, an enigmatic denial of resolution. it's a kind of negation of address, it obliterates the *you* to whom it is written as surely as the *you* who writes it. it invites complicity. it is an accusation. it is a violent act, an act of violent grief, a magical act. you will not understand this. diagnosis is reductive. the suicide note is like a mediaeval allegory, because suicide itself is a kind of allegory. it connects us. it draws us together through an extremity of gesture, it stands not only for itself – gentle reader, leaving that thought there.

gentle reader,

humiliated momentness. letters are an exercise in ego, catalogue of non-event, everything minutely futile. why give this life outside myself? it didn't go well today, my manuscript reminded him of *a serial killer's scrapbook*. also, it doesn't *sing*. i have made a harvest of held breathing; my book would turn a face blue. jenny said consider what you're good at. i have a talent for burning the toast, ironing holes in shantung blouses. that is all. i didn't go to the party because *party* means having a panic attack in the toilet. i don't have friends, as such, poet of weaponised temperament, unsure of how to stand, hitching her tights in a tactical skirt. he said *people want ugly girls to be noble*. my lack of moral turpitude won't play; to go around sundered and galvanised by turns is no way to behave. you have to knuckle down, endure achievement, smile at their ties and be grateful you don't get worse. people want me to live in the *real world*, where emotions are logos, and you know what they mean. we got coffee in the square, between the dress-down shirts and the fogeyish gardens. a few early wasps were picketing the litter bins; a sleeping bag like a puffy tongue, rolled redly out upon wet grass. backpackers skinning up. pencil skirts feeding squirrels, bemused uniformity. the mood was aridly non-fictional. he told me *not this time*. he told me *life is rich in incident*. which sounds like the kind of excuse that people make for people, and by extension for themselves. a pigeon drags a clubbed foot like lord byron. the strap from my rucksack digs into my shoulder.

gentle reader,

sometimes it doesn't go so well, reading. i was on the stage making my mouth round, like a captured damsel in a silent film. i was trying to speak clearly, an announcer calling stations on an overground train. this is what i call *doing a poem*. *doing a poem* is a specialised form of biting the hand that feeds. i *over do* things, the kind of person who, for one bad apple, takes exception to an orchard and cuts down all the trees. i imagine wielding an axe, in fact, not sharp, but heavy, and swung with such delighted violence. *doing a poem* is acting your imbalance, screaming out loud how *you're all going down with me!* jenny said you can't like other people if you do not like yourself. but this is untrue. i like melissa very much, and lots of women, and my dog. but preciousness is a property of stones, not people. that which we're composed of isn't dazzling or loveable. and sometimes, there's a person, with the pearly frontier of their teeth just waiting for a breakage; a smug person, and ghoulish, rubber-necking you and the wastrel pain you've become proficient in. i want to ask *what's wrong with you?* did i invent myself an audience to have someone to hate? poetry is the art of making misery strange to someone. i say *purity is cowardice!* and several goth boys cheer. i was on stage, then i wasn't. life's quotidian extremity, the lung insisting air. these things *keep you going*. whatever the shit that means.

-

today made-up for talian *giallo*; i was made for tantrum and schnapps, for tenebrated nakedness; libidinous guignol. you might not think so, but it's true. pamper the hatchet. play for me those three black keys in a scorpion chord. i'll wear the reddest dress in recorded history. cut me from my stockings with teary eyed and tomfool scissors. your love lives in your left hand, baby. in a pretty smile. in a string of pearls. i was made for all the gargoyle vices of men. my hair is loose, and gross with roses, lush wet fault i'm sweating with. heavy breath. a queenly spite. i was made for this. my vinegar contrition; twisted seam in american nylon. i'm a difficult word in your runny mouth. crack the spine of hymnals in a church. i'm here in a bad habit, baby, in diamonds as big as babies' heads. i am wiles, and foibles, interference, delirious in yellow light. take me on the sawdust floor of a circus tent. jagged pout you'd target for a trophy, the smile in woozy splinters, rearing teeth. you might not think so, but it's true. sumptuous in punishment. suave with discontent. *bella figura*. arrive at a typecast ecstasy. there is a ruby moon tonight. there is a bead upon a needle; an angel raving on the head of a pin, pricked and teased and pleasing to god. laid out on the bed like a body in the library. i'm made for this. believe me now? i shiver like a table at a séance. put your hands on me. your housebreaker's gloves. recidivistic kink i buck and sway with. i steal, kleptomaniacal, moi! ply my snide arousal like a pro. a blonde wig, a change of clothes. i'm tendering kinetics for a dare. delicious risk i run with, bleating default. wrap me in a red screen, in a bed sheet. treat my bones with bleach. i was born for this.

~~gentle reader~~ biddy,

this is by way of being a *moral epistle*, in my infinite wisdom i have something to impart: this world isn't kind to *girls*, its spiky cheer, its soiled consent. but we go on. you do not need to ask things of the candles. you have yourself. the eye has taken hostages, all those greens and blues, a smile's brief wounded mirth, the *friend we have in jesus*. there is no cure for the things you've seen. this world isn't kind to *girls*. in a bad dream, your father, running like a black bull. the mouth sweats nothing sweet. in the deep night's muffled default ask yourself: can you abide *or* vanish? you cannot. and there is glass in the treads of your trainers, smoke in your hair; asphodels growing in the dirty park, premature, idiot and spindle. *everyone is there*. the makeshift sustenance you suck the druggy tit of. this is what *provisional* means. from the irish for *despair*. this world isn't kind to *girls*, streets of unmappable, stooping mien, the boys regress in hooded groups, their orange-yellow hair is grated cheese. a thin dog, sagging like an old cane chair. the wino by the swings, his sleeping bag a chrysalis that heralds spring. and cats among the litter, their plans are intricate and stupid. kids resemble ringtones, off the hook in empty houses. a pill deprives the day of pattern. goes on forever, doesn't end. and you are thin as a crease in a cotton sheet. a shaky breath, your lung collapsing like a two-man tent. you throw a blind wish at the mirror, stark in the sadly mistaken light. this world isn't kind, lackeen. in a dream, your father's head is boasting its frightful sainthood, gap-toothed with old acquaintance, stretched beneath the skinny sky. a ghost has its own shining gravity, a whimpering rarity. this world, venting vice into the steely air. meagre folly, indifferent prayer. this world isn't kind to *girls*. morning comes, bleary and unburdening itself. the ploughed fields like soft black corduroy, a mild and palliate moon. deprivation, gathering its vanities. you're smiling, cutting into you, like breaking the skin of a seedless grape. your breath a stream of bubbles, raving under water. this is all you have. a harsh world you'd be an expert in. it isn't kind, lackeen. it isn't kind.

gentle reader,

to wake from a thin, insoluble sleep, to the colic hospitality of landlords, cousins, thin familial strangers. should i rise, should i walk, befriend the fearless streets our fathers thundered down like bulls? the house is silent. count to ten, intuit the darkened room. i want to write a poem. a poem distorts the space around it like a recent grief. i want to climb inside of that distortion, lie down and sleep, for years. outside is sweat, the brittle predilections of the men, old men, and westie's dirt verbatim slurred. i am afraid, but still i come, the steep, beset and ransacked north. i run between premeditated terraces to catch his after-image: *lover*, who answers to no compass but an erring star, his eyes the rudest blue you ever saw. last night my dreams were made of knives, moving in shoals through the city like fish. their impudent caresses, his skin a secret garden, opened up, despoiled. i am afraid, but still i come, seized by a backward, sighing power, and talking to myself. saint martin's in the dark. cramped salvationeering, for the famished or the lost. he used to say that *priests travelled in packs like wolves* and *fuck that*. faith is a false economy, or anything else you're bullied into. metallic, strangled coughing of the bells. breakneck stairs. depression's creosote perspective: he is lost, and i am not absolved. nor anyone. to wake, with the insufficiently-singing heart barking at starlings, perverse and haunted. a decomposing ozone i am one with. this city is morbid with doorways, inclined to ghosts, and stammering. a mastiff bitch could suckle human twins for years. our love a rome where all roads lead. i follow him. an arcade draws a sickroom breath across its dusty gums. shops are two for one in a floundering light that flatters no one: skinny kids as pink as carvery beef, fidgeting and scolded; nasty men in harrington jackets, adulterous proficiencies, cuffs they fasten with safety pins. i am afraid, but cannot sleep. allergic to a lullaby. i follow him, the eye a bag of tricks, a hobbled place where light crawls in. a green dread i grasp like a nettle. and the market, its tatty penchant, paper bags of oranges. there's jesus, a militant wishbone, pokey-gold. you can buy him for a fiver, a slight and sharpened weight to rip your finger open on. a man, embellishing a bargain with a silver tooth. i am disgusted, look away, entangled in adrenaline. the afternoon expands to swallow me: polarised insolvency, intermittent vintage, college rock. the city girds its seismic folklore. he is lost, i hate the world. the bookshop is a pouting zoo with extra froth. rotten coffee, second-hand fiacc. i close my eyes. i have practiced dispossession to achieve a state of grace. saint martin's. unlit candles like apple cores. i make a midget cone of fire for him, cheap

summons for the dead. god is breathing on the back of my neck. i am handled without skin. i cannot grow significant with suffering. i long to lean into the study of his sleeping face like a forger. or i would drink to greet forgetfulness half way. but i cannot. i talk of *love*, but *love* is an inferior extremity. beatified in a priceless light, he rises to sainthood on paper wings. there is no english word for the magnetic pull of certain pains.

every day a backward dark, delving awkward into morning's pallid advent. a soft, syndromal light let into rooms. hours of stricken and hiccupping mien, and *whatdid you think would happen?* gaunt indifference, with nothing to get up for. ugly houses, an air of eager menace, and the alleys heaving an inbred riposte. urine. homicidal shoplift. a dead, dry plant with crispy bacon leaves. i are nothing now, an excrescence in the eye of an overworked g.p. there is nothing for me here, the profligate affinities of friends who say they *love* me; the sheepish chivalry of husbands, editors, father figures. *why bother with rising at all?* to be the subject of slack whispers in bars; to hide from people, things: that old cowering proficiency. somebody said *you are not your worst day*, but this disease puts out more roots than branches, and anyway, there's nowhere to go but down. grey-brown fish food flakes of snow. a study in malnourishment. an untidy shadow like crumpled clothes. a book is better eaten than drowned, you couldn't teach *these* idiots anything. the self, weighed and blackly estimated. this pain might be a force that exits via the fingertips, something sharp like electricity. but it isn't. a dull blow like the cold slap of a wave. nothing now, groomed to droop, to wheedle in a slumping rank to clinics and to agencies. and what's the point of you? the welts and hives you're stickle with, a self-inflicted tortoiseshell. i know the difference between lost and vanished, suffering and punishment. much good has it done me. or anything else. i know what best to do.

h a l t i n g s i t e s

settle//



/shift

and i feel like a needle of grass in a stream
things become clear: case studies study these
halting sites. strategies, provisions. *we slept*
on straw between
everything (in)adequate. *empowered but not*
obliged, the pearly scrape of bone
that showed beneath your jeans you're dressed
in a laugh your brother outgrew, and *ouch*
that fucking hurt it does. they do extended
family, mortar is hostile to houses held up by
consultations, caravans. *you can lead a horse*
to water i was still with saying your name,
attempting an ancestor – how the mouth makes room
for a tall silence nothing fits
fists.

h o m e



i s h o m e //

to facilitate and limit to minimise an eyesore
your compromised economies economies
of compromise economies of longing.
opposed to permanence, allocated, idle.
allegiances, *priorities.*
someone said that memory is the scar of moment
how kids are meat in mainstream schools, the way
they talk and everybody knows *because*
they're traveller.
there were times times of scrap times
of sweet unlicence all gone now. agencies,
complicit in subsistence, my *abiding sense*
of persecution. covenants, apologies, exemplary,
accountable to count precarious teeth
on days the dark blue curtains guillotined
sleep you said there's *no such thing*
as rubbish dust as perceptual waste, residual
culture, the body collects on covers of books
in *your* library, *gorgio* you said they said
i think they said *hedge-humping cunt, get out*
of that one without moving.

in / sin // e r a t i o n



[of rubbish]

with one eye open.

as themselves

route through a window

notion of *home*

escaped.

the ethnic event of us

her pleat of pale flesh *daddus*

dragging

a dead swan
under the earth.

salaried practitioners: crisis
of immunisation there's broken
down there's *breaking in*
women & houses horses.
prevalent, congenital, autosomal
care
is blatant and sensitive *home*
remedies. exacerbated. cured

wild rhubarb dipped in
sugar sucked straight
from the bag.

adverse
underneath
motorways exorbitant rates
you cannot afford to –
kissing cousins, carcinogens
recessive inheritance it isn't –

urgencies [other urges] en
tails a slant
perception of time.

reared



emphasise. define
what it means to eat
your own
expectant dust.
morbidity still
births close- knit
equation of risk, debility,
discipline:
strict or permissive & you
danced your rare attendance
in a settled school
in plimsolls

settle to *settle* down
decision debt
acceptance of less.

emphasise
define
readjust adjust dissolve
the walls around your house
bricks & mortar
a beautiful dependency.

lost //

is not //



the same as missing...

*for your peace i pawn my own soul,
amen –*

there are
implications detriments evictions
so much shit the shit grief is
profound prolonged consumed
to cope to feed
internal feuds the feeling of being
a bird in a cage
to mourn distorts the open mouth,
it makes you ugly.

there are
national strategies & medical
interventions barriers, bailiffs
enforced mobility *they took*
the world of stuff off us
causality, sequence, place & time
watered your horse at a single
tap. cold water cannot ask for
clarification explanation
developments & benefits
flies & rats
and the stress of shifting
the fear
of being scorned.
discrimination, site address
this passing place
or for your soul i pawn my peace

this family shame has skewed
the perception of prevalence.

here: gender & attendance

here: empty

land the temporary

homeless

here: demographic profile,

smoking status moderate

pain

here: chronic cough, anxiety

probable angina

here: correlation variance

sputum, dental readjustment

kinship self-

destructive mourning.

here: mishaps of appetite,

god's intervention

st patrick's well

in marlefield

here: misuse & feelings

of confinement, the need

your eye

holds like a colour –

perversest green.

dirt



is not earth

we've a pain on our shoulders
from carrying coffins pardon
my self-
disgusted tongue
my autonomy my vomit
the way i take up space to live
with being unlikely:
a faction a temper
a pivotal feud.
irritability, poor cognition
the landfill the pitfall a diet
of flight to eat the air
between the feathers

miscarriage, convergence
conditional love: *six times*
higher than the national average

dear bastion, dear bastard gene,
dear exemplary statistic
tear strips from this enormity
the sworn page
anomalous li[f]e.

t r a c e s

are you there?

hey soldier safe crossing. hey, are
you awake? cue moist-eyed duet
with moon and stars. hey,
just listened to the forecast. brutal
an unrehearsed hand on a hashkey
poundsign rather you than me. hey,
just seen

the forecast. was it rough
enough for you? are you

green

yet? *sick,*
i meant queasy, shut up. hey. hi.
hello. hello? are yous back
in *the land*

yet? am i talking to myself? did yous
jump overboard? did your phone
walk the plank? do yous sleep *wid da*
fishes?

the fuck?

did yous mutiny? yous are back now,
right? barry's tea & kimberly biscuits,
flegs with *everything.*

give my regards to westie, the dogs, to
your brother, i'm serious. hey,
you forgot your *whatever*

tile cutter? that thing is a tetanus shot
waiting to happen. thank your lucky
thumbs you can still –

hey soldier,

yous left your trainers, your sovviess

and your mum's lacquered box. what
should i do with your mum's stuff? do
you want
me to ship it? hey. hello. are yous
actually ignoring me? did your phone
die? don't. don't make me ring
your brother. we still love you,
only slightly, only slightly less
than we used to,
my love. joke.
hey. hey. hey soldier, you okay?

informal report

hey soldier, the clock can't tell anymore
time in time.
police are false prophets. forecasts,
conclusions, a widescreen tv
with the sound turned off. nuclear
kickabout

echo

static ecstatic etched
 in acid

i watch until the dark broke and lack
of sleep perfects

a kind of shapeless courage.

somewhere

between pique and mirth, a uniform
will hold
the pen tight enough
to raise a white

blister.

cold silver gelatine crosseyed stare
difficult ethnic surname. *no,*
as in nine hostages, *tribal kingship.*
schizos

move through a city like untidy dogs
fifteen fleas on a deadman's belly. yo-ho-
ho. don't you
understand the question?

who is this individual

to you?

appropriate action

illiterate continuum of risk.
your distressing geography. action
will be intensive, measured, active,
proportionate, undue in darkness,
 delayed risk will be
indicated, addressed,
 complex and linked. you
are factored
 out
of you. swear on
your paramount star: you are
a citizen, a subject, (an object)
 objectecting.
last known at: absent without:
postcode. evicted from
 arrested for.
 dir-ty squatters! oh my god,
 they're moving in next door...
resident. new guidelines. new
 definitions of missing.
suicide: threatened, attempted &
failed. risk: perpetrated, posed.
inform a fatal gesture
 with a hand *we need*
an exact diagnosis. distressing
geographies. tricyclics,
heterocyclics a tedious green
that swells the eye illiterate,
semi-literate. closed community.
(officer ((mis))conduct) *generational*

mistrust

interpret. misinterpret

to others and himself.

relativity

jurisdictions, scrutinies. we are
the wrong kind of close *clan*
mentality. there is *no*
familial relationship, no
 tessellated bodies in
a marriage bed. no common-
law we have no law
 in common.
confirmation *from a third*
party, preferably *a blood*
relative. will wait for
 your brother's preferable
blood.

follow

hollow fellow
 &
howl fall

the harlot and the wolf

the harlot and the wolf

the harlot and the wolf

the harlot and the wolf

millwakes, skinflints fishermen.

anything the black canal is

troubled

by. suicide's boot on the edge

of the water. whingrass tansy

orrisroot. the way a name will

gnaw at you. the raw prospect

of spring. your cut

strings

what is tied and what is bound

there are lunatics painting idiot

grins onto plaster saints

in a home for *the hopelessly*

mad convulsed in a vest in

a spendthrift light the least

lovely

of god's children. you smiled i saw

myself.

my flesh strayed in a kingdom

of fingers. seven stone two in

ninety-eight. tricyclics, inhibited

uptake (slow) to walk again

a bloodshot corridor with you

with *all* of you

má tá aon brí le ghuí an bhfile

no. nature makes

indiscriminate collisions.

tunnel visions. syndromes.

visitations.

bog asphodels, our pale

champions dogs, beguiled,

carnivorous, listening. melody

and conquest, these are our

rhythms i make return.

hollow *fellow*

chewing your wound like a wet

straw. trembled daylight

magnifies my fault.

my mouth is full

béal feirste

of sand

endless forms most beautiful

the missing person is under sixteen
and over sixty-five years old,
has expressed

suicidal

feelings

suffers,

from senile dementia, alzheimer's
disease, has been acting out, out
of character, is suffering
from mental health related issues,
increased exacerbated stress
an illness

or physical disability, is known to

self-medicate

the missing person is in need
of regular medication, care,

has impediment, imbalance,
poor verbal or written

communication,

is an addict is at risk from

has struggled to cope with
routine lifelong long-term

dependency

the missing person was wearing,
was carrying, has the following

distinguishing marks, traits,
features, characteristics.

upset or calm

you do not know their date

of birth but this can be

obtained

understudies

clean shaven, found hanging
jacket padded black unknown
watch 1 digital watch black,
black
rucksack, blue woollen hat, black
ski gloves, black shoelaces, loose
change. *body.*

slim build white european, found
found in river near wraysbury.
goatee, trainers white unknown
lonsdale velcro straps. khaki
coloured ribbed style jeans, cotton
vest. new year's day.
remains.

male, walked off leeds-bound
platform, sowerby bridge.
moustache. mishear:
sows ear sour be sorry,
can you repeat?
hit by passing train black
boxershorts black thermal leggings long
unknown. khaki denim & blue
patches. belt blue unknown.
che guevara
t-shirt, green. jacket black unknown
(promising) body-
warmer brand unknown khaki scarf.

detachable hood, gold
(head / halo) silver metal
linked. watch 1 bronze coloured bezel.
false teeth plate *remains.*

circumstances: male *body*
found in caravan
in rural location.
believed to have died
no more than 4 months earlier
an overdose. a ligature. extensive dental
work *body.*
body of work

what you imagine

emptied your pockets. of knives, nine sided
dice, coloured scarves
of contraband & unicorns,
blades, misshapen stones. blue peroxide,
rotten tooth. stubborn knot in leather thong.
black unknown black unknown
your body rehearses a cruel potential of bone.

see you in twin peaks wrapped in plastic
nightmare pale dirt is kicked
to cover shit. a lesser dirt,
you are.

camp as an anne rice vampire,
i kiss your frilly sleeve.
found by fisherman, fished for
like a compliment.
malevolent defencelessness sense of being
handled, raw and without skin. wrists
you tried to raise above
the waterline.
red on any given day. a quarter-inch
of cuff on show. here, discreet, precise,
encircling. scars. *apparatus of risk.*

uniform with folded face explains how
absent isn't missing isn't lost.
but your hands, the knuckles splitting
open fat and purple pollinating.
out of the crouching dark, this feeling.

brain.
your brain: sea creature sore
aswim in
boiled ammonia.

discoloured, acclimatised. you are
stretched out in a cold bath. or else
they've made a tidy cuisine of you: plate
and centre, piquant and spotlit. gorgeous
trending

meat

in your aunty's house, no one will feed
the kitten militia, no one will wind the spite-
ensombered clock could cover the mirrors
or smash them. it's a kind of shame to be

this lost.

a law unto hisself, she says.

no one whirls their whiskey

round (like blazes).

lenience is not *mercy*. this body is not

your body (incorruptible body).

dredge the canal and even

her tea table casts a long shadow.

t h e b o d y

the body is discoloured, damaged, very changed.
is scarred, disfigured, incomplete through injury
or intervention, illness & decomposition, time
it lay in water. remember this: the body
has any distinguishing marks. has moles, tattoos,
piercings, missing teeth, etc. *a calligraphic bird,*
egyptian, blue. the body has its eyes
closed only the head
and hands will be visible. *orpheus.* the body
will smell of antiseptic agents, the embalming
process. the body will be dressed
in unfamiliar clothes compare
the body to its photograph. *you have*
a photograph? dental records may be used,
dna. the body is documented, appears
to have lost and gained weight. variable
factors, indicators, trajectories. this is a legal
requirement. *don't cry, you do not have to*

wailing women

our ambidextrous martyrs die by both
hands here to be deafened
by a racist joke. it is forty-eight hours
in a&e with the armoured future

 erecting itself outside
the automatic doors. faulty math of
the catholic faculty. *under every bush*
they said. old women sit
beside me, whittled out of stale bread,
of injury and prayer, they carry all
their thrifted craft in carpet bags,
in kaftans, bangles, over-

 spilling ankles. *oh, such*
sandwiches! system of permissions,
recycled air, absurdities, a cracked
cylinder of coffee, somebody's

lost
monastic scapular, cat teeth wrapped
in cotton handkerchiefs. symptomatic
fingers waiting, pilfering and partial-
sighted penny toffee, oddly mis-
completed crossword. an audience
without a play.

gulls called forth by sunrise to a rooftop.
ambergris and opal fruit, a walleyed air-
force sweetheart perspires inside
his plastic frame. *during the war,*
of course. *which war?*

very much in love, of course

both paranoid and smitten, was dutiful
in pomade, brogues, in serge,
in borrowed englishness.
love as a sepia microclimate:
compulsory function of buttons
victory rolls. old women
talk among themselves like trees,
connive a complex song:
there's reveille and woe,
forgetfulness and funerary wassail
strong drink and strong words for
strong men big strong men
the corrugated ribs
of radiators steam. famine. victim.
shaggy dog.

the ear incites its own undoing, allows
a crawling voice inside.

we labour under daylight
(saving), squint at forms and stifle
sleep. corpses turn their smiles upon
themselves. a car-park is replete
with hooligans (and sparrows)

*not this time. not this
time. not this time.*

forensis

the deceased was agitated, jaundiced, confused,
experienced stiffness, tremors, difficulty - - -
speaking, could not form complete
sentences, could not remember
name, address, date of birth, could not count
backwards from ten, could not sign own name,
read, recite the national anthem give
meaningful consent. the deceased spoke
no english and some english and broken en -
- - glish and english with a strong accent.
the deceased *absconded from hospital*,
had several convictions
for drug and alcohol related offences, a belief
in god, was known to have a history of mental
health problems. *it's not unusual for that*
community white was white was gypsy
or irish traveller was *gypsy* brain edema
followed no next
of kin. intracranial hypertension.
cirrhosis exposure. *very distinctive scarring*.
both parents deceased.

hear deceased as deceit. parents deceit.

n o r h o m e i s

under an aconite sky, the street where you lived
is slogans and rosaries nettles
release their bruised scent beneath
boarded-up windows, beneath - - -
 they legislate against stained glass.
eviction notice.

christ is a pink hinge of skin in a terrycloth
nappy and killjoy saints like marxist professors:
a theory, a sleeve, a serious frown. i have loved
the radioactive half-life of other people's houses.

 trespassers will be
 will be, *que será, será*
home is a logo on kerry-green golf shirts
souvenir tea-towel, american selfie here,
you had dressed yourself for the last time,
addressed your troops and then the mirror
evicted you. eight dead wasps behind
the curtain. horny little self-succouring
stings. no one will tell you to
take me in your arms, and conjugate
the verb to fuck in cotton socks.
in catholic school lining up your ex-girlfriends
like the smiley-face stickers you get for
trying better luck next time
 and never.

 what rigor means is stiff, is shock,
is oh, my multiplying chills! to be febrile
and spastic an unrepentant fumble for
each other. or dexterous caresses.

i could hear you though the hole
in the floor: *roll me as you would a cigarette,*
one-handed a mean pinball.

the poliss

confirm identity, ask the questions,
taketh away *all items connected with the death*
archivists, collectors of behaviours and histories
 black canal a lead apron blank expression
 the coroner
investigates, arranges and decides will tell
you where to stand and who to call and how
to wait a *cause* of death.
specifics and incisions certificate for fact.
is temporary. the insult and the slap.
 the inquest follows.

caruthian boogie / thin time

what i mean is: trauma-time stutters and loops
is a gold hooped earring, a drastic cartoon.
i see you
the eye slides off your cheek, is thick yellow egg
off a hot
skillet the hand's on fire on backwards, gait
out of joint. impoverished continuity
eyebrows exit via a jagged
hairline. hanna-barbera reusable background,
smarter than the average bear our cheapest
delirium yet.

picture it this way:

all of us up-cycled: suicides, rapes, deaths,
repeating (demanding forgiveness) a moment
without ever wearing it thin time is not
used.

wait. what? thin time.

this photo exposes my most expendable self:
true crime fatalist, unluck's literal minded
darling. the current, the currency, time uses
us uses the *me too* hashtag, is *not* a medium
we move through. impediments, revenges.
it dangles us spancelled
marionetting (*ejaculant*) we are
entangled trailing your own corpse
like a clubfoot for all the days of my life

point at a place in your dream and say

this is where i died and *this* place and *this*
your tattoo is a motto on a sundial:
tedious and brief time is not *wasted*. no
one gets rich or grows wise.
the house always wins. but to savour
that breaking, once, with a gambler's
fitful joy, the minor win that makes
a mooncalf of a drunkard,
this is the most we can hope for, our highest
possible calling. big hand, minute hand,
stretcher case baby

do i fucking stutter? what part of no did
you not understand?

deep breath

counselling. carpal tunnel masturbators
yellow faces dipped
in votive bromide finding consolation in
a loosened tooth, in god and cat-piss
coffee

come, perturbed and gutless,
insert a sanitised hand (between)
my thighs the pages of a king james
bible the liquid soap is all over
everything like rising sap.

hushed spite, a disproportionate
hunger we will meet half way
trying

out the wanton etiquette

of widowhood.

red head illicit thrill i'm pitied for
and woozy on. slurring nightmare
seldom dreamt. impossible flesh, i
want your body my friend, my
once and supple undoing. you are
unmaking my memory to trace
your stubborn architecture, ~~one last~~
time profligate and bullseyed
in an alley behind filthy's

banjaxed, maniac. amok in the frilly
dark filing her teeth poor cow.

the heart of the rowl was dicey riley

verdict

underlying & contributing factors,
conditions. diseases, predispositions.
a train of morbid events leading to
chronic, longstanding, immediate,
direct, sustained & acute. *injuries*
incompatible with life. pronounced,
declared, attributed to. infections
and failures. joint causes to appear
in brackets below
(alcoholism, patriot games).

nor home is home nor
home is home nor
home is home nor
home is home nor
home is home nor
home is home nor
home is home

*in the night season*¹⁵

paper flowers ply their trade all winter long / dress it up / in anyway you like / this grunting human
fact / i am poured out / like water¹⁶ // they drink an adequate mirth / invent / a laboured joy / my
enemies / the neck / invents new swords / the soul / invites / the usual / humourless mischief /
rumours of war¹⁷ / the breathy lisping fracas / of our nightly news / new putsch / new junta / purge
/ and pogrom // vicarious mammal / upload a grotto light / from phones / *the deafening street was
screaming all around them*¹⁸ / my dear old friend / a stone lion / couchant / after prayer / the hand
that seeks / its corresponding shipwreck / in a hand / *tapetum lucidum*¹⁹ / the light / their eyes relay
/ a rinsed unanimous green / citizen journalists / the viral griefs we feed // \ \ abdul \ angelic
dudebro \ in a red bandana \ america's masochist vowels \ are soft \ in your mouth \ *except for blood*
 \ *what flows in the guts?*²⁰ \ vertigoed fault \ and everlasting malady \ we also flow \ \illegitimate
daughter \ of an unofficial army \ likewise pyromaniac \ *i understand* \ i said \ we live \ to make \ a
fetish out of thresholds \ a threshold out of fetishes \ we \ who have no home \ *where did you go?* \
and does your eye \ ripen with \ a green light too \ you brought me \ chapatti \ endemic bread \ a
slap we eat the salt of \ cold rice \ with our fingers \ your precocious mouth \ ensaffroned \ we

¹⁵ psalm 16:7, 'i will bless the lord, who hath given me counsel: my reins also instruct me in the night seasons.'

¹⁶ psalm 22:14, 'i am poured out like water; and all my bones are out of joint: my heart is like wax; it is melted in the midst of my bowels.'

¹⁷ matthew 24:6, 'and ye shall hear of wars and rumours of wars: see that ye be not troubled: for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet.'

¹⁸ charles baudelaire, *á unepassante*, 'the deafening street was screaming all around me. / tall, slender, in deep mourning – majestic grief – / a woman made her way, with fastidious hand.' analysing *á unepassante*, walter benjamin writes of baudelaire's poetics as shock-driven, allowing themselves to be riven and scarred by the textures, sights and sensations of modern life; its aporias and impasses, its ruptures, lapses or leaps of feeling. trauma.

¹⁹ dog and cat eyes glow because of a layer just behind the retina, called *tapetum lucidum*. this layer reflects light. cats, dogs, deer, and other nocturnal animals have good night vision because whatever the photo-receptor cells in their retina don't catch, hit the *tapetum lucidum* and return again to the retina. they get more photons from the same scene. in found footage shot at night from inside conflict situations the eyes of humans seem to behave the same way.

²⁰ mirza asadullah khan ghalib, one of the great poets of the mughal empire, whose ghazels are still popular in both india and pakistan, *twilight in delhi*, 'to my eye the pleasures of the world are nothing but dust / except for blood, what else flows in the gut?'

listened \ that beauty might befall us \ *i'm going home* \ you said \ shading your eyes \ from the war's asymmetric singsong \\ // *deliver my soul from the sword / my darling*²¹ / from dogs / intended evil / the *mischievous device*²² / a fire infecting everything it touches / madness comes / both swaggering and harried / in every shipwrecked impulse / accelerated sea inside / a spasm in the salt / fucking is / a laboured joy we consecrate / the bed becomes / a concrete overcoat / *deliver my soul / my darling* / this, the guided tour / of tightropes i have fallen from / my fainting status / *cries for help* / paper flowers flounce in their jam jars / i am the cool ideal / crescendoed in a bathtub // \\ abdul \ little simba \ singled out for fingerprints \ your brain a belly-dancers's jewel \ you swim uphill \ with dislocated shoulders \ in a primrose light \ bilal²³ \ persecuted \ treasured \ you \ call to the cult \ of burial \ *who'll hear this prayer?* \ girls who have become \ the apple of their own undoing \ deliver us \ from mirrors \ this too, you said \ was *haram*²⁴ \\ // to solve a rose with scissors would be sweetest / long days / of monotony and posture / the mind intent / upon insect kingdoms / i itch inside / the seeming skin of me / a paradox / of pleats / and cheekbones / no desire / to swivel and fix / beneath the blistered weight of anyone / florid and allergic / this fur-trimmed foolishness / inward scream / an unrelenting light / empress of austerities / please save me / poets / purveyors of the pervert-real / opinions and tendencies / and the house you return to / the bombs / reorganise this light / you are flattened / shaped / tidied and spun //

²¹ psalm 22:20, 'deliver my soul from the sword; my darling from the power of the dog'.

²² psalm 21:11, 'for they intended evil against thee: they imagined a mischievous device, which they are not able to perform.'

²³ after bilal ibn rabah, loyal *sahabah* (companion) of the islamic prophet muhammad. considered as the first muezzin, chosen by muhammad himself, known for his beautiful voice with which he called people to their prayers. described by william muir in his book, *the life of muhammad*, as being 'tall, dark, and with african feature and bushy hair.'

²⁴ *haram*, any act that is forbidden by allah, one of five islamic commandments.

father / figure

safe house / say / f-uh / house / fun / house / un-house / *wrecking ball brings hope to slum*²⁵ / they said / and peter's death / would glorify to god²⁶ / with arms outstretched / and upside down / his hair / is in his eyes / his mouth / and on the long arterial road²⁷ / playmates / raised / on catafalques / and chequered bread / *get under the bed*²⁸ / they said / you wept / the bullet carries / seany's head / upon its back / a hermit crab / this / is everything they promised us / and less / the big / *adventure of high-rise living*²⁹ // men / dragging their knuckles / across the middle / distance / men / with tattooed dewlaps / goosebumped in bermuda shorts / they fly / their stomachs at half-mast / to speak of your da / you close your eyes / his fist revisits / his errant son³⁰ // martyn / in a meeting / fifteen minutes / and then / an old argument climbs / into / your mouth / a list of words / you never want to / hear again / *objective* / *authorised* / *empowered*³¹ / and seany's head / you said / the bullet *travelled* light / the bullet / *passing through*³² / this wreckage / is what fathers do // safe house / say / f-uh / house / no house / is safe / with mattresses against / the window / *the truth* / *commission* / somebody / *commissioned this truth*³³ / you said / some / body / considers *the past* /

²⁵ headline in the *la times*, october 31st, 1993. subheading reads: 'gunmen and criminals have given way to trees and driveways in belfast's infamous divis flats'

²⁶ divis being in the parish of st peter. st peter as in simon peter, or simeon if you really must. and simeon being a martyr, and crucified upside-down. and simeon's death being said to bring glory to god. in the gospel of john. i'm writing this for the benefit of your university heathens.

²⁷ an arterial road. as in through the falls to andersonstown. .as in therapeutic phlebotomy. as in *emergency exit*.

²⁸ everyone was screaming, though mainly agnes.

²⁹ so said mister gerry fitt mp, the subject of many popular songs and rhymes. in the 1960s. when the flats went up. fair play, though. he said *adventure*. he wasn't wrong.

³⁰ you read me this article. male unemployment is 22 percent in ulster, but in divis it's twice that. 7 out of 10 heads of household are unemployed. that's the phrase they used: *heads of household*. and therefore alcoholism .and therefore domestic violence. he hit me so hard one time my eye popped out of its socket.

³¹ the truth and reconciliation commission, its role as outlined in hayner, pricilla: *unspeakable truths: transitional justice and the challenge of truth commissions*, (routledge, 2010). where do you get this stuff?

³² as it did with patrick rooney. first star to the left and straight on till morning. *passed through*. i hate this phrase. it makes it seem clean and easy and harmless.

³³ because 'official' history can't contain this. and because it's like at school. and father michael doesn't want you to *say* sorry, he wants you to *be* sorry, and he thinks by *making* you say, you'll be. but you won't.

rather than on-going events³⁴ / but time present and time past / are present in time future³⁵ / and your suicide sings / in the undecided light / where childhood / redoubles its hiccups / picking the dead / skin / from its feet // say / f-uh / house / marty / we deal in traces³⁶ / not in time / you're with me yet / i'll orbit my own / private / portion of storm / candidate / for this / or that / i watch the world / satellite the eye / is fattened / on systems / systematic cloud / the whorled ozone / sundered blue / the view from here / acquires the logic / of distance / a blank page is god // oh, say / how do houses speak / recycle their damage / into new resources³⁷ / resist / when i put on my books / commit / this forfeit of allegiance / and when / the forfeit returns / with a vengeance / in the morning / or / impelled towards sleep's velvet spasm / all our dark interiors / exposed / it has never not been now / divis is / combing the stones / from her feral smile / bury you / invent fresh history / history exists / to punish the excessive / demands of its poets³⁸ / ollam / i covet the idiot dead / utterly beyond satire³⁹ // f-uh / house / ous / say / abounding in / a burdensome grace / at pains to take / up space / your beauty / swims / the width of my working-out / and theory fails / to function / your death / is flesh made maverick / a bomb is everything a building was / devilish dust⁴⁰ / a poem / is everything a body was / horrible angel / i tighten the bolt / in your neck⁴¹ / with a safe

³⁴ because it isn't over. because it's never over. because it can't be over until every single one of us is dead.

³⁵ you're paraphrasing. mr t. s. eliot, redoubtable fascist-sympathiser, from *burnt norton*, 1935. didn't know i knew that, did you? death is a very modernist impulse.

³⁶ trace is that which is outside time—chronological time, time as it is tracked by official historical record—and yet immanent to it as disjuncting event. put another way: every contact leaves a trace. put it another way: haunting as repetitive strain injury.

³⁷ robin james, *resilience & melancholy: pop music, feminism, neoliberalism*, (john hunt publishing, 2015). really? nice work if you can get it.

³⁸ as in the 13th century *tromdámh guaire*. see, bards are trouble, always have been.

³⁹ because *guaire* was a braggart whose boast was he'd never been satirised. he invited the poets in with all due hospitality and they overstayed their welcome by feeding off of him like a load of locusts. he got what he deserved, but you take my point? yous are like boggarts, a kind of poltergeist, once welcomed in impossible to extract. you know this about yourself, right?

⁴⁰ from eyal weizman, *forensis: the architecture of public truth*, (sternberg press, 2014). the way in which absence is registered. war isn't told through happenings but gaps. for instance: this dust was a building. for instance: what happened to liam?

⁴¹ because like frankenstein's monster i am some kind of revenant? the poem as unhallowed art, etc? it's camp too, in a way. it isn't frightening anymore, it's too ubiquitous. until you really think about it. and ulster's steeped in those images, lumbering cartoon bogey men. grotesque. in the proper sense.

pair of hands // in a meeting / fifteen minutes / talk about / *catholic ghettos*⁴² / you are / so angry /
you shake / rain prickles the skin / of a dark pond / and a partial mania / we're stuck / economics //
hire purchase⁴³ / right to buy⁴⁴ / and other / thatcherite wheezes / like seany's head / with brains
blown out / where the wound is a slogan / where a dead baby / becomes a slogan / a catch-all chant
/ you can fit / in your mouth / your mother / *never got over it* / *the shit she seen* / you said / was
everything / we passed a hat for // *executor* / or / *executioner* / these job descriptions come / with
hoods / accidental archivist / misguided good intentions / distortion and omission / the body as
magnetic tape / you're everything my instinct clings to / what's left / presumptuous zero / bridges
alert with lights / *you're from london, yes?* / no / watermark / we mark / the water / enter here /
inter / i mean / tear here / cut / i parse my sickle traits / my phobic blood / shame fits / like the skin
of an apple / squeaky tight / you float / in the centre of my headache / lily / of the valley⁴⁵ / we are /
christians of the best edition / *all picked and culled*⁴⁶ / inscrutable mood / in classrooms / my
temporary body / *my pattern of events*⁴⁷ / here's a document for you / canonical honey //

⁴² they keep on saying this. as if *ghettos* are chosen, elective and sinister. ghettos are done *to* people. there's a point you just stare at the dirty brown water and you're too exhausted for pride.

⁴³ instalment plan. through which we pay, for ford cortinas with leaky radiators, fridge freezers, colour tvs. or did. payday loans are much better, though, aren't they? i wasn't using my fucking kneecaps for anything.

⁴⁴ because you'd want to, wouldn't you? put up a picket fence, all pampas grass and windmills. make you proud.

⁴⁵ in a jar. on your windowsill. true believer. your faith frightens me. the pull of any inherited thing.

⁴⁶ rançois rabelais. obviously.

⁴⁷ commissions are for shit. truth is not uncovered but constructed. sweet baby, you of all people should know that.

jagged little pilot

take twice daily with food / shots fired / through the window of a white wedding / swallow your intolerance / caught / in the convex mirror / of your own desire / extending a tactical hand / across / a trough / a swill / of lilies / you'll be scraping his entrails / up / with a spade / in the valley / the cows cling to their meat / derrida said / his future doom / has always stalked / your friendship⁴⁸ / mourn / to mourn / to mourne⁴⁹ / nothing up my slieve⁵⁰ / st john's⁵¹ acetic head / smiling / like a skinned grape⁵² / today was / academics / pickled in their disciplines / you were / encircled by ring roads⁵³ / a swan was a silent dress⁵⁴ / you were a swan / you consented to feathers / autumn in norglen⁵⁵ / the leaves / are falling like fingernails / dear mrs lock / we cannot disclose / i return⁵⁶ / an unqualified eye to the text / you will meet him here / forever and nowhere / else / dear mrs lock / you are not lovely / you are leaking⁵⁷ / myopic / astonished / deface the parade from the photos / sporting your blood in a psych ward again / the fire has dined / on those you love / you might have loved / who might have loved / a girl like a pillow fight / falling piano / a face you can heave at the

⁴⁸ '[this is] the mourning that is prepared and that we expect from the very beginning...' jacques derrida, (p. 146) *the work of mourning*, university of chicago press, 2001.

⁴⁹ the mourne mountains, a granite mountain range in county down in the province of ulster. immortalised by percy french in 1886 with what became the folk-band staple 'the mountains of mourne'.

⁵⁰ slieve donard, the highest peak in the same range of mountains.

⁵¹ both st john's point, county down, from which the mournes are visible. also st john, son of cairlánd, for whom the area is named. the point is a possible location of a tenth century shrine church dedicated to a saint whose legend has all but disappeared from history.

⁵² from the practice of preserving the bones of saints, including skulls, as holy relics.

⁵³ turf lodge in west belfast, being literally encircled by ring roads, making the area unfortunately popular with joy riders.

⁵⁴ from an anglo-saxon riddle in the book of exeter: 'silent is my garment / when i tread the earth / or dwell in the towns / or stir the waters...'

⁵⁵ norglen, west belfast.

⁵⁶ from the official response to a request for release of material held on self and family members by the london met. also other institutional interventions.

⁵⁷ 'all god's children are not beautiful. most of god's children are, in fact, barely presentable. the most common error made in matters of appearance is the belief that one should disdain the superficial and let the true beauty of one's soul shine through. if there are places on your body where this is a possibility, you are not attractive — you are leaking.' fran lebowitz, (p.6) *metropolitan life*, e.p. dutton, 1978.

sea / not even the sea could / *dear mrs lock*/ cringing and lurking / by turns to the mouth / of a long barrow⁵⁸ / bored in the earth // *take twice daily with food* / double take / the eye / snaps back on itself / in a freakish light / you need / some *perspective* / they said / a face you can leave / by the edge of the sea / you can fold with your clothes / at the edge of the sea / not even the sea / could claim a face / like yours / the unguessable dark inside a marble / the sleeve has emptied itself / of birds / a watch is a wound we wear on the wrist / keeping / the creeping ten carat time / of all unwanted things / you were not / what god intended / *dear mrs lock* / what they cannot disclose / is a voice that sings / hey / *neither you are you / nor home is home*⁵⁹ / nor home is home nor home / nor / glen / acute impossible melancholy / sucking a hardboiled hash tag / heard a girl / say / *rape baby*⁶⁰ / you need / some *perspective* / hamill⁶¹ / is to hold / hostage to a name / to / a mutilated namesake / scarred / stretched / like a skin of a drum / and a man / with knives for teeth / romancing his advantage / in a hospital corridor / you must allow yourself to be / *occupied* / by other voices / they crowd your mouth like curses / crowd your mouth / red velvet / fully / upholstered / in profanity / cunt like cinema bucket seat / *rape baby* / *dear mrs lock* / *we cannot disclose* / *distance*/ is the lipstick / between your bottom lip / and its most / dangerous profession // *take twice daily with food*/ snow white / in a crown of expendable swallows / this is the line in the sand / between mourning / and melancholy⁶² / this / is a border crossing / you / are smuggling thoroughbreds⁶³ / dead men insisting like whitman / i am the man / i suffered / i was there⁶⁴ /

⁵⁸ newgrange, a neolithic monument located near the river boyne five miles from drogheda.

⁵⁹ from the poem fragment by abu tammam, 788 – 845, adamascan poet and muslim convert, best known for compiling the *ḥamāsah*, considered the first and still one of the finest compilations of arabic poetry.

⁶⁰ from the article *the legitimate children of rape*, andrew solomon, the new yorker, august 29 2012, and the internet comments surrounding the publication of this article.

⁶¹ from the irish ó haghmaill, who claim descent from 6th century king niall nóigíallac, or niall of the nine hostages, whose historicity is dubious at best.

⁶² ‘in mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself.’ (p. 246) sigmund freud, *mourning and melancholia*, penguin classics, uk edition, 2005.

⁶³ from the practice of smuggling horses across the irish border into the republic.

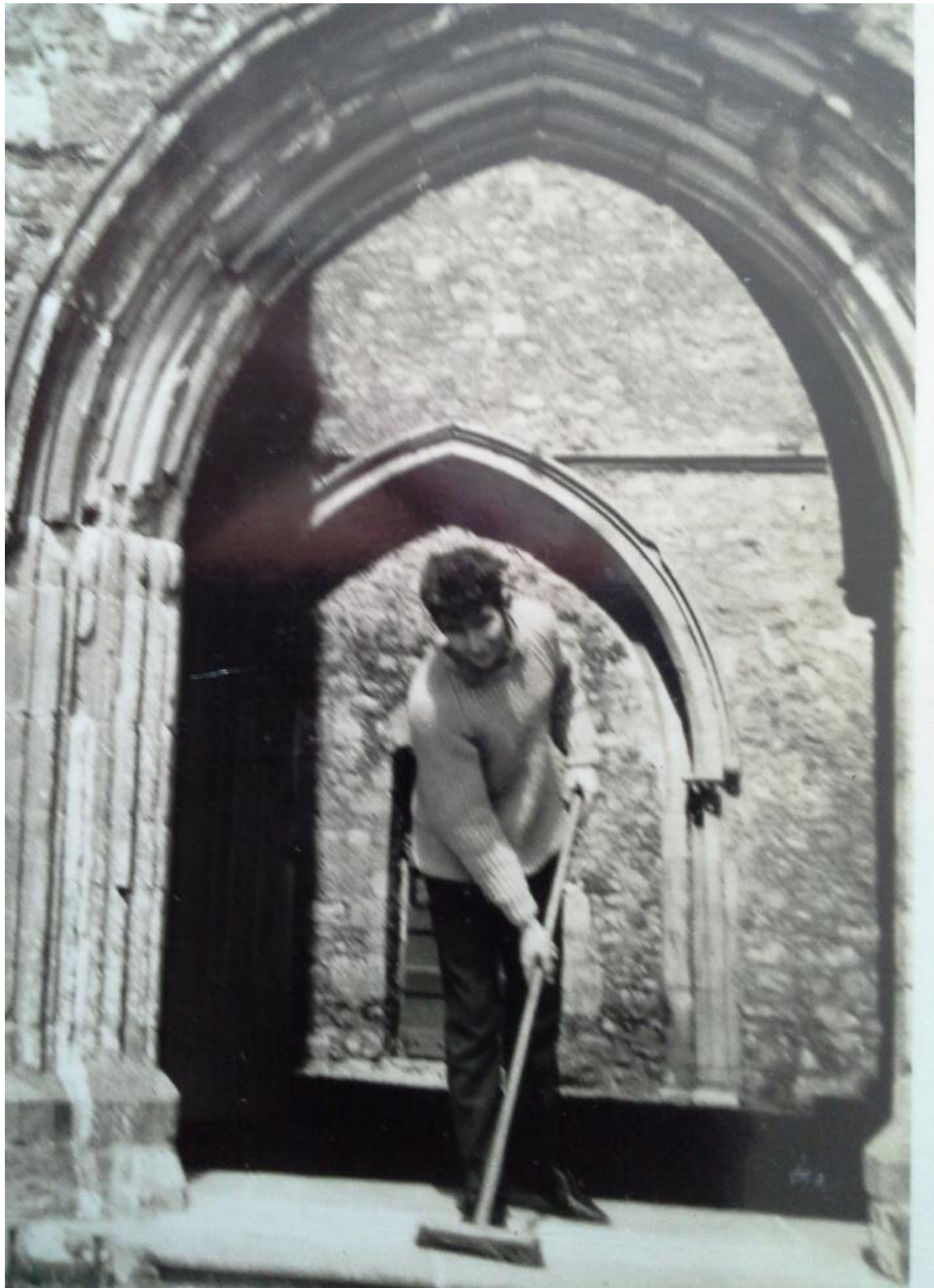
⁶⁴ ‘how the lank loose-gowned women looked when boated from the side of their prepared graves, / how the silent old-faced infants, and the lifted sick, and the sharp-lipped unshaved men; / all this i swallow, it tastes good, i like it well, it becomes mine, / i am the man, i suffered, i was there.’ (p.25) walt whitman, *heroes* penguin classics, 1961.

hunger will make mystics of us all⁶⁵ / in the end / pervert the polarity⁶⁶ / travel back in time / quicklime and bitumen / byzantine fire⁶⁷ / panic / insinuates / ensues / consumes / a spider in the corner / artificing silk / from silence / from names that take the shape of cravings / mícheál / martyn / daddus / home / today was academics / shrink wrapped in their disciplines / practice / the erudition of derangement / cultivate / the sugar coated pill / that rides you like a nightmare / like the nightmare / that you are / jagged little pilot / your captain and your parasite / teach you how to hold your hand / as steady as metal wing / a steel edge / the dead / flow over / luckless currents / the suffering air.

⁶⁵ from the ascetic practice of self-torture by starvation as promoted by christian mystic sects as early as the 2nd century. also, the political protests of irish republican hunger strikers. also, the self-starvation of anorexic girls. the contention that context makes meaning from pathological, self-injurious behaviour. that culture makes this differentiation in a way this poem does not.

⁶⁶ variation on 'reverse the polarity', a popular sci-fi cure all on tv series doctor who during the 70s.

⁶⁷an incendiary weapon developed and popularised during the byzantine empire but whose exact composition is lost to history, forms of so called 'greek fire' were still in use during the time of the irish civil war, defined as (mainly clay) projectiles, filled with explosive or flammable compounds, most likely various ratios of bitumen or quicklime.



if not of memory (a sonic investigation)

my testament. ~~my testimony~~. my testament. to testify. to test – if i –

there's proof in this. there's evidence. dense proofs tightly packed. will and witness. there's property and dispensation. moral authority, legal authority. there's ian paisley's protestant god. to speak in tongues, in tribute, in tributaries of riven sound. rhythm, sound. unsound in mind. the clinical split in the tongue. to tie. to bind. to diagnose. to die –

to sacrifice. sacked grammars of servitude. patois, riffing and rife. to serve. to serve as a sign. *bible*. *libel*. my liable babble. to serve. to wait upon. to wait. this sound a crouch that cannot spring. servants, serpents. usurpers, you israelites. no light, no weight, no river *euphrates*, freighted and dry. *i'm boyne to the bone* said the wet dead boy on the bottom of the world. i heard.

what is sound? in the air or in the ear?

a pained vowel, the intelligent shape of noise. to hold you, becalmed in the bowl of my own forgetting. insensible shell, the ear that makes an ache of my mishearing. *caje sukarije* – both *beautiful* and *good*.

what is sound? the present scar of form, how form is scar, how *memory is the scar of moment*. to suffer an artful thing like *hurt*, that is the greed of certain words grown fat upon their meanings.

and still they say: no, not a *true* measure, everything that's mere between the moral, legal, grammars and gravities. gavels. dictions – addictions. that language is the limb we long with.

between the glance and the grasp – the hand span, the shrinking tongue – what if the word lived in my fingers? how a name extends a body through space. to test – *tell me, computer, where am i from?*

when my accent's not a language but a tactic. creoles and pidgins, cants – *you caant* – you can't –

terse. to talk at the speed that paper tears, that coins are counted. *quick and terse*, they said.

the diaphragm frames this pain. this sound is all my knowing. creoles and pidgins. pigeons. birds.
sullen ubiquity blurred by flight. begins in beauty, ends in dirt, in *dirty*, mirthless disgust between
bins and benches.

an samhradh 'teacht 's an chraobh len' ais / is ionrach te ón ngréin – in gordon square.

where language dwells not what it does. my loosened bowels, loadbearing bones. my bones. to gnaw.
to ignore. to strip the flesh from a phrase with your yellow incisors, computer, so only the bone
shows white. tomorrow's marrow doubly sucked.

what is sound?

the revel, the reveal, the brightest thing we know. *is metaphor and frenzy*. is the rathkeevin road
when wings are infected with flight, when flying is the malady our sky eats, catches and is caught by.
by which i mean the words fly also out of and away from me –

a migrant sun slides like an obol over my inward eye.

a cataract. a tract. contracted and contagious. blind, abbreviated, trapped. to serve as a sign. to *sign*
here please...

and they say: *you did not tell your story the same way twice, your story isn't true. access denied! your*
claim is denied!– idiots:

the conditions that produce the story are the same conditions that tangle its telling. now this is not a
story it's a spell against the self i am compelled to say over and over and over –

and you weigh my safety against a greased feather. against a wedding dress that is its own weather
system, stars on a nicotine ceiling, tarmac, a car on bricks, a scrawny horse – everything you think
you know.

here is something new!

here is a gold statue of a monkey with glowing stones for eyes. icon. idol.

and the man screaming *popish whore!* into my face. what dwells in a word? meaning or belief?

testament. test. assessment. assessed. to preach. to pray. to persuade and to exhort. to speak in
tongues. to possess, to be possessed, to bend the spines of bibles – a truth you twist until the hymnal
cracks along its cadence – to *parlay* – all we have is words, these *weapons of the weak*.

his *last* words. final craving shaved to grace. an ice air sucked over the teeth. some words are
like that. some equivalent dream of being free. say *state of grace* or
better, *the grace of being stateless*. that is without form and without borders,
repented human shape.

women in headscarves whose identity is domicile. *remove those mummy-wrappings*,
and the head is a cage of contoured air – who says so? oppressed by what on behalf
of whom? i see you, britain.

her body is a knot you cannot untie and that is why –
*where are you from and where are you going? where are you from and where are you going? where
are you from and where –*

poor. poured out – like water –. porous. that heritage is also sensory. that is *of* and *without* sense.

how a gesture might transcend the wreckage of a word. what is and isn't language?
the limits of a miracle, an awe that strikes us dumb –

tinnitus. to test –
my name for home is a shroud of sound. war is a machine for replicating cemeteries and engines,
patriotic songs, bastard children. speaking of...

interrupted and interred. *entered* into the data base. *interred* within
the database. didn't you know, that visibility is not the same as presence? to be seen is not to be
recognised. to be recognised is not to be understood. to be understood is not to be *known*. i mean,
the why of what we are beyond our categories

two tinkers, good sayers of

prayers, travelled through the

country...

i have a name that i keep in my pocket like a coin worn smooth. i have another sort of name, this name is an earth-moving machine. *while we slept the beam of light swept over the weeping women...*

what is ordinary, and what is ordained? predetermined and elect of god

permission, lips compressed to a paper cut. the tongue slips. vodka sliding over ice. eclipse.

an ideal image. a mirage, a marriage – nana in white – filament of tortured silk, unravelled –

how a cuff is bloodied, succumbs to blood, is dragged through butter, becomes grotesque....

i lay for a long time, lulled and ill, in the fever of my speechlessness. the computer takes *testament*, makes *testimony*, turns the weightless worth of *story* back on us. testament. test –

money talks. but silence is *golden*, not *gold*.

what is told, what is tolled. there's a price and a cost, and a fee they extract like a tooth
at the root of a word.

the lie skirted the curve of your mouth: *if you've nothing to hide*. to be otherwise.

the false *else* they rip from you.

unmake me, god. my ill-starred atoms smashed apart. people

marching in grim white multiples. the computer addressed me, undressed me
at an airport. test –

the hole i sew into saying. serf. to surf. a frictionless pain
that bears us backwards into the future. *i cannot say but i can sing* –

what is sound? an ecstasy, an act. not a language but a tactic. not a tactic but a fact.
someone says *assumption*, which is prejudice, ascension. a rising to light. tell me computer:
british other irish traveller british other white other other white other traveller other irish other gypsy
i sat on a panel and pulled apart these words. each word was a struck match bent in the striking.

graaltcha mary, tawn a noos... anois, agus ar uair ár mbáis...

her robes remember her floating shape, fold her ghost inside of them. to adhere, to hear. to follow
and to stand behind, to stand up for. to be here, now, listening –

my mother's hair hangs like a flag.

encore. the core. the centre. the centreless centre. at fault, faltering, default. to be wrong the same way
over and over and over –

but these were my words and this the poacher's pocket of my language, the lining torn.

dostoevsky says in shame that he begins a hymn. in shame we *become* a hymn. in shame.

our singing is all that survives of us.

to be penetrated. our traits penned. obsolete, refined, traced.

your nose, your ears, your eyes. the cartilage, calligraphy.

probabilities, potentials, anything measured. phrenologist's head like an undertaker's mute.

to be heard, to be herded. the static of statistics stick, are stacked against, again –

from the power of the dog, my darling. captivated, feart.

NOTES ON TRAUMA AND IDENTITY IN THE TEXT

The emergent poetic cohort my research is seeking to identify, and with which I identify myself, is one for whom the 'sharing' of traumatic experience is central to poetic process. It is also a cohort that interacts with and engages specific aspects of therapeutic practice; that borrows from therapeutic themes and modes, that references and returns to a lived experience of therapy. Given this somewhat pressured intersection between private pain and public utterance, between literary and therapeutic forms, I might usefully ask whether my own work contributes to or is complicit in the perpetuation of exemplified exposure outlined in trauma critical discourse.⁶⁸ The ascendant status of the traumatic victim is, through poetry, intimately linked to the privileged position of a confessional lyric 'I'; a lyric 'I' whose ethical credentials have, throughout modernity, been called repeatedly into question. Both the poems and their reflective adjuncts participate in this process of questioning, a questioning that both informs and emerges from practice.

It is my contention that in their continually self-interrogating reflexivity, my poems engage with, inscribe and respond to contemporary critical anxieties about self-exposure; that they constitute a commentary upon such a tendency, as well as a method for resisting recapitulation in its worst excesses. In the 'author photo' sections of *narrowcasting* I make an ironic mode and commentary from personal coterie, exposing the uneasy relationship between the poem's public life, and my own inner experience of suicidal ideation and paralysing grief.⁶⁹ Through the lens of the 'author photo', which serves to mediate my identity to my readers, the pieces interrogate notions of aesthetic essentialism, subjectivity and public perception:

⁶⁸ Stephanie Bird, *Comedy and Trauma in Germany and Austria After 1945: The Inner Side of Mourning* (Modern Humanities Research Association, 2018), and Didier Fassin, Richard Rechtman, *The Empire of Trauma: An Inquiry Into the Condition of Victimhood* (Princeton University Press, 2009).

⁶⁹ Poems 29 and 30.

...my brittle eccentricity. the flashbulb reels around my cheekbones. lift my chin. don't hunch my shoulder. lean into the literal-minded lens. singled out for mute invisibility. killjoy and conjured with. a girl isn't *formed*. conspire her into life from everything she's half of...

In the second 'author photo' piece, the sight of my book in the window of the London Review of Books sparks a meditation on the precariousness of my identity as a published poet, and the ways in which this image of myself is contingent upon and shaped by class, ethnicity, culture, and other imposed essentialisms. Although the poem's apparent impetus is petty professional jealousy, the text functions as a critique of the English literary establishment's attempt to erase or effectively control traumatised utterance by channelling it into marketable accents, discourses and forms:

...i used to posh my voice because i thought i had to – forgive me westie. forgive me stoney. forgive me slievenamon – when i started out, i mean, those fucking fucked abyssal days, the rain, crisp scent of failure. why? i was oddment, figment, born all wrong. yes. i chased things, misremembered, courted the seared maze of my blood with tiny violence. this white flower, this garret beacon was all my cipher, a toy bloom which withering signifies home...

In the 'enough fucking rope' section of *narrowcasting* I consider both the reading of my own work in light of my 'madness', and the way in which suicide is used to construct or dismantle particularly kinds of authority or legitimacy in the world of popular culture.⁷⁰ By drawing on iconic figures such as Kurt Cobain and Ian Curtis as the symbols of an exemplary rock n' roll suicide, I consider the way gender contributes to our understanding of suicidal ideation, and the dangerous myths readers construct around notions of the romantically 'damaged' artist.

⁷⁰ Poem 12.

Dr Morton Silverman, Senior Advisor to the Suicide Prevention Resource Centre has also written extensively about how poetry might be used as a tool for assessing disorders and behaviours.⁷¹ This is something I have discussed in therapy, and I write with my therapist's assessing eye as a haunting, potentially censoring presence in my poetry. As works of published poetry that have escaped beyond the clearly delineated boundaries of my therapeutic program, my 'gentle reader' texts force the reader into an uncomfortable identification with an implicated other in the person of *jenny*, raising questions about readerly responsibility, poetic reliability, and ultimately about the nature of 'truth'. I ask to what extent we read a poetics of trauma or mental illness through the lens of its pathologies, professed or ascribed, and how this affects our understanding of the text. The poems interrogate the idea of performance, and ask how we interpret the performance of trauma and its claims to authenticity.

As Donna McCormack writes in *Postcolonial Narratives and the Ethics of Witnessing* all testimony is inherently performative because the speech act makes possible the process of narrative production, but trauma testimonies are performative in specific ways, in their compulsive, repetitive witness to events or experiences that cannot be encompassed or accommodated by the narrative form.⁷²

What then, might the implications be for both poetry and therapy, of a creative practice that brings these two forms into collision? This is one of the fundamental questions my creative practice attempts to investigate. In the 'gentle reader' and 'for the dead' sections of *narrowcasting* I am frequently and forcefully testing the limits of narrative letter writing technique, and its ability to console or reorient experience. Despite outwardly conforming to a proscribed therapeutic pattern, the poems embody a continually threatened incoherence, an experience of non-sequential time, and

⁷¹ *Comprehensive Textbook of Suicidology* ed. Morton M. Silverman, Alan L. Berman, and Ronald W. Maris (The Guilford Press, 2000) pp.40-43.

⁷² Donna McCormack, *Postcolonial Narratives and the Ethics of Witnessing* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2014) p.20.

other elements of anti-narrative.⁷³ Through these techniques I ask questions about the ethics of witnessing, and the narrative demands placed upon those compelled to recount their experiences of trauma.

⁷³ David Read Johnson Ph.D and HadarLubin, *Principles and Techniques of Trauma-Centered Psychotherapy* (American Psychiatric Publishing, 2015) p.274, and Cathy Caruth, *Listening to Trauma: Conversations with Leaders in the Theory and Treatment of Catastrophic Experience* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014) pp.224.

SOME FEATURES OF THE TEXT – *NARROWCASTING* / *CAOIN*

WHY *NARROWCASTING*?

The term ‘narrowcasting’ was first coined in the 1940s to describe the way in which subscription radio broadcasts disseminated information to small local audiences as opposed to the public at large, although today it is used mainly in reference to the postmodern idea that the so-called ‘mass audience’ does not, in fact, exist. In the context of this collection the concept of ‘narrowcasting’ is connected to the ways in which the epistolary form in poetry might fruitfully complicate the ‘ideally universal address of literary language’.⁷⁴ To my mind ‘narrowcasting’ also has a resonance of prayer: an address that disperses into the ether, an address that is nevertheless intended for an ambiguous omniscient other. It is this troubling association I want to provoke in my readers.

The document that became *narrowcasting* consists of a book length collection of epistolary poems in two or sequences: ‘for the dead’ and ‘gentle reader’. I have chosen to submit these sections in particular for their close affinity to my critical submission. As a practice-based, autoethnographic intervention into knowledge, the poems are a vital form of research, at various times provoking, driving, subsuming and displaying the trajectory of my critical enquiry.

The poems in ‘for the dead’ have their impetus inside the therapeutic program, and in my own experience of letter writing as a form of scriptotherapy.⁷⁵ They emerged from the program of bereavement counselling in which I was enrolled following the death of my close friend by suicide the

⁷⁴ Gillian White, *Lyric Shame: The "Lyric" Subject of Contemporary American Poetry* (Harvard University Press, 2014) p.32.

⁷⁵ This term was first defined by Suzette A. Henke, *Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women's Life Writing* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2000) preface, xii.

previous year. I entered therapy equally devastated and frustrated: frustrated by language and by my own poetic practice in particular, in its abject failure to either accommodate or express a grief I experienced as engulfing, destructive and utterly anarchic.

Therapy extends to us the possibility that in articulating pain we may adjust to it; that by unlocking something in language a portion of our sorrow will be eased. And yet my own grief would not yield. I was not silent; I spoke and wrote continuously, frantically. I felt compelled to write, to speak, but writing and speaking consoled nothing, resolved nothing. My grief was not without language, but somehow *beyond* it, and it was this feeling that became the spur for my future research: if language is a compromise, a kind of imperfect sieve for lived experience, then how can I or anyone else ethically or adequately embody grief through poetry?

Although I wrote a great deal following the death of my friend, the immediate aftermath was a time of profound disengagement for me as a reader. The poetry others suggested served to fill me with an unreasoning rage but did little else to provide an emotional change of tempo. The poetry I encountered, mainly through anthologies, Google searches or well-meaning friends seemed either ridiculously melodramatic, or else trite in its promises of consolation.⁷⁶ As time went on and I continued to reel I noticed the impatience of friends and family with my refusal, as they saw it, to 'come to terms' with my loss, my refusal to 'mourn', my refusal to 'heal'. I found myself trying to explain: it was not a refusal, but an *inability*. The work of mourning seemed exhausting and inadequate, and I could not find meaning in the usual words or rituals associated with that process. It was this despair of an explanation that provided the second spur to my research: if a poetics of mourning is inadequate to experience, or worse, risks erasing it altogether, then what does a poetics

⁷⁶ For example *The Art of Losing: Poems of Grief and Healing*, ed. Kevin Young (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2010), and *Poems Of Mourning* (Everyman's Library Pocket Poets) ed, Peter Washington (Everyman, 1998) etc.

of grief look like? How might grief be encountered on the page? What are its aesthetics and its rhetorics? When I was asked to write letters to my friend as part of the therapeutic program in which I was enrolled, the hybrid form of epistolary poetry that developed became a space in which I addressed not only my immediate grief, but the memories of other griefs his loss had initiated in me. Through the lens of these several losses the poems ask questions about the normative performance of grieving, with its implied moral imperative to heal. The section begins with the statement ‘i have mourned you, but i have not grieved’, and it is through uncovering the vexed distinction between a poetics of mourning and a poetics of grief, that my creative practice drives my critical enquiry.

The ‘gentle reader’ sequence began within the same therapeutic program as ‘for the dead’, but expanded across multiple iterations and various platforms, both analogue and digital. In the ‘gentle reader’ sequence the pieces adopt the therapeutic strategy of letter writing, but this time to a host of ambiguous and unnamed others. The stated aim of the therapeutic letter is to encourage the disclosure of feelings or experiences the participant may be otherwise reluctant to share. The perceived privacy of the letter is seen to have a disinhibiting effect, and its intimacy facilitates emotional release.

It is this notion of privacy that spawned the ‘gentle reader project’, and the poems that grew out of it.⁷⁷ In its online iteration the ‘gentle reader project’ was a sign-up site where any number of ‘gentle readers’ could register to receive an original typewritten, illustrated letter by post. The site also records and archives some of those letters, and provides a space for sharing the ideas that underpinned the experiment, as well as linking to spoken or performed versions of the texts.

⁷⁷ <http://smithyofhersoul.wixsite.com/gentlereader>

Influenced by my reading of Derrida, the project begins by exploring the notion that the act of opening a book, and that of opening a letter have radically different symbolic weights; that they encode intimacy and disclosure in different ways.⁷⁸ Taking for granted that to have any kind of language is to invoke the spectre of publicity – because even the most confidential communications between people are necessarily inserted into a public space, legibility being an irreducible feature of language – the project uses the poetic epistle as an occasion for negotiation with various systems of permission, poetic and therapeutic, that allow multiple kinds of charged disclosure. The letter emerges from this experiment as way of navigating the inherently compromising publicity of written language, creating an intimate liminal territory where the various decorums of received practice – poetic and therapeutic – are suspended, and other kinds of writing, other voices may emerge.

The ‘gentle reader’ poems are just one version of the original typewritten letter-texts. Existing as they do in various renditions they raise questions about ‘the plural event’ of the poem, as well as ethical issues surrounding privacy, publication and performativity which underpin my critical enquiry and my consideration of the letter as a unique mediating space between poetic and therapeutic forms and projects.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Jacques Derrida, *The Postcard: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond* (University of Chicago Press, 2012) p.90.

⁷⁹ Charles Bernstein, *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word*, ed. Charles Bernstein (Oxford University Press, 1998) p.9.

SOME KEY CRITICAL FEATURES: SIMILE

Researchers and clinicians have tended to account in common for the function of similes in narratives of trauma as ‘hedged attempts at metaphors’; as the ‘first steps towards a symbolic account of the inner reality’.⁸⁰ Similes, then, are a cautious signal of healing, a movement towards the metaphoricity and symbolic thinking regarded as essential to integrating past traumatic experience into a person’s present life.

As a poet-practitioner whose writing seeks to ethically embody the unconsoled or unredeemed experience, and yet whose work is replete with figurative language, I am compelled to ask what implications this understanding of simile has for my own creative practice, and for this project in particular.

There is no substantial clinical research into the way similes are mobilized by poetics of trauma; existing literature is primarily concerned with the use of figurative language in narrative prose.⁸¹ I contend that there is a markedly different interaction, and a different set of relationships at work between figurative language and trauma in poetry. I further speculate that this interaction will necessarily be complicated when viewed through the lens, not of therapy alone, but of an emergent poetic practice.

⁸⁰ Magda Strojinska and Kate Szymanski, *What was it like? the role of similes in the development of symbolic thinking in trauma narrative*: <http://www.raam.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Cagliari-book-of-abstracts.pdf>

⁸¹ Geoffrey Hartman in *Listening to Trauma: Conversations with Leaders in the Theory and Treatment of Catastrophic Experience*, ed by Cathy Caruth (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014) p. 224. Hartman does connect figurative language to trauma through the Romantic imagination.

There has been a tendency among various poetic coteries to view simile as a diminution of metaphor, and this echoes clinical readings of its use as a 'hedged' metaphor, a sort of half-way house between untranslatable trauma and assimilated experience.⁸² However, there are those who ascribe to a more nuanced reading of its many, often troubling, possibilities. As poet Alicia Stallings writes in her essay 'Similes and the Moving Van of Metaphor', similes generate 'an interesting dissonance' between images and ideas.⁸³ My own use of simile in both the 'gentle reader' and 'for the dead' sections of *narrowcasting* deals in this dissonance, in the juxtaposing, layering and comparing of images in suggestive and disturbing ways: kids are 'as pink as carvery beef', a pigeon in Bloomsbury Square 'drags a clubbed foot like Lord Byron', and the meticulous work of assembling an archive is 'like unpicking stitches'.

In the context of my own creative practice similes operate in a highly particular way: they are both the site and the representation of my struggle, first to comprehend, and then to faithfully and ethically inscribe reality in text.

Simile generates a complex and allusive territory where the ambiguities and instabilities of grief are dramatized. In the space the poems create there is little that is certain, and little that is incontestably true; they embody the argument that trauma affects and distorts not only the way we process the traumatic event itself, but all of reality.⁸⁴ The simile connects specifically to my own lived experience of both Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, and of sudden and shocking loss; its use embeds an ongoing

⁸²Magda Stroinska and Kate Szymanski, *What was it like? the role of similes in the development of symbolic thinking in trauma narrative*: <http://www.raam.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Cagliari-book-of-abstracts.pdf>

⁸³ A.E. Stallings, *Similes and the Moving Van of Metaphor*:
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2007/11/similes-and-the-moving-van-of-metaphor>

⁸⁴ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996) p.4.

disorientation with the world around me, and the resulting insecurity I have about defining or describing my lived experience through language.

In the 'mischief' section of *narrowcasting* the simile leads the poem's 'i' through a succession of imperfectly incarnated selves, as animals and as inanimate objects: tactical dogs, flightless birds, magic eight balls, busted tumble dryers, etc. creating an unstable subjectivity.⁸⁵ The images do not complement or clarify each other, but jar and compete to render a fractured, disorganised speaking subject. In doing so the poem raises questions about the notion of self as a secure or steady category, and about the authority and reliability of the lyric 'I'.

However, by harnessing the simile's poetic history as a space of commentary and irony, the poems embed both self-awareness and self-reflexivity, refusing a purely pathological or symptomatic reading. When deployed in this way the simile not only represents the experience of traumatic grief, but is used to undercut and question those representations. This often takes the form of an inappropriate or disproportionate analogue, as in this short excerpt from the 'how to be terrible' section of *narrowcasting*:

i wear my brash beloved trauma like a beret. see?⁸⁶

The image of the beret carries associations connected to the way in which western popular culture visually encodes the idea of the poet, more particularly, the idea of the poet as someone who is depressed (think late-nineties Daria in beatnik costume). In associating this image with my own lived experience of trauma the poem raises questions about both poetry's and my own authorial

⁸⁵ Poem 11.

⁸⁶ Poem 12.

complicity in the romantic aestheticisation of mental health problems. The rhetorical 'see?' is an acknowledgement of the piece's performativity before an equally implicated or potentially judgemental reader.

Elsewhere in the same sequence, mental collapse and the dissolution of self is described as 'coming apart like a three stage rocket', an image suggestive of immense destructive capacity, but also great pyrotechnical bravura.⁸⁷ Through similes such as these the poems acknowledge their own performativity, and its uneasy relationship to an ethical representation of trauma.

⁸⁷ Poem 14.

SOME KEY CRITICAL FEATURES: EMBODYING AN ETHICAL LYRIC 'I'

Wisdom, both conventional and clinical, tends to describe the aesthetic disposition of a poetics of trauma as necessarily operating on the cusp of inarticulate collapse, at the extreme edges of silence. When we imagine a poetics of trauma we might call to mind Charles Reznikoff's *Holocaust* or the *Death Fugue* of Paul Celan. We might remember Adorno's accusation that after the wholesale destruction of human life at Auschwitz poetry's lyric modality is rendered not only suspect, but in fact 'barbaric', grievously unethical.⁸⁸ The poetics of trauma should, by this injunction, not merely fail to console traumatic experience, but meet a radical ethical imperative for some experiences to remain beyond consolation.

This idea has significant implications for a creative practice that attempts to account for and embody traumatic experience while still compulsively impelled towards the lyric. The poems themselves interrogate this seeming contradiction, working, not to banish the lyric, but to embed an awareness of its potentially compromised aesthetics; to mobilize the lyric as a signpost to its own deficiencies and failures. In this manner the poems attempt to reinvigorate and sensitise the lyric mode, and contend that an ethical lyric is possible, that an ethical lyric is in fact thriving, in the shape of a self-aware and self-reflexive poetics.

Further, the poems question the implied assumption that the human response to shocking, violent death is always an unequivocal speechlessness. Trauma, it is true, disrupts any attempt at coherent narrative speech, but that is not to say it renders us silent. Rather, speech may become compulsive, garbled, repetitive or obsessive. It might oscillate wildly between the manic and the leaden, it might take refuge in pedantic precision, it might make sudden ecstatic flights, it might howl or keen. The

⁸⁸ Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (Routledge, 1974) p.362.

poems in 'caoin' choreograph these various features into a performance for various 'voices', embedding aspects of pathological articulation such as verbigeration, perseveration, and echolalia. These linguistic tics combine with a sense of dislocation in time, and a deliberate ambiguity as to who is speaking and who is being addressed. The poem is a 'caoin' or keen, and in its spoken iterations it embodies several sonic elements of traditional lament or keening. It is also a piece of symptomatic theatre in which I attempt to enact the psychic conditions of my own traumatic grief: a loss of time, of self; the way in which the death recalls, confuses and compounds itself with other losses.

The 'I' that emerges through these performances is still a lyric 'I', but it is a vigorously performative lyric 'i' and not a purely confessing one. Through the use of the epistolary form the poems create a space of charged disclosure where Romantic conceptions of a privileged lyric 'I' collide with a self in dissolution under the intense pressure put upon identity by grief, and where questions are asked about the way in which lyric address is implicated in the erasure of the subject.

SOME KEY CRITICAL FEATURES: NAMING

In the 'for the dead' section of *narrowcasting* the grieved subject often becomes a hauntological presence: Martyn and Mícheál dominate by absence, constantly referred to, but never adequately represented, while the texts make a mode and a commentary out of naming, operating not only as works of lament, but as spaces for and a way of thinking about what it means to name within a poem.

The epistle promises an enclosed and intimate referential specificity, but the hybrid poetic form problematizes this notion, recruiting an entire web of cultural and social inferences, allusions and associations to which the name belongs and upon which it draws to support and create meaning. The names in *narrowcasting* function as intertextual fragments, gathering around themselves a constellation of accretive associations and implications; they interchange, adopt and discard various disguises, and appear across multiple iterations. When the poems in 'for the dead' address in quick succession: 'x', 'cousin', 'comrade', 'quare fellow', 'ghost', 'compañero', 'gallowglass', 'angel', 'baby' it suggests that identity is neither a stable nor essential category. Is one person being addressed or many? How does the chosen name affect the way in which the reader decodes or understands the relationship between the poem's speaker and the poem's addressee? It creates dissonance, a troubling ambiguity; similarly, Mícheál's name in its numerous translations, particularly from English into Irish, suggests that the self is an insecure and contested notion, culturally, politically, and psychically.

The lyric letter, then, is for my creative practice an essential space, a space of mediation between poetic and therapeutic forms that operates within a continually constructed and exploded privacy. The epistolary form plays with and tests multiple kinds of charged disclosure; it invites the

assumption of connection, but ultimately withholds admission through a use of proper names, nicknames, pet names, private jokes and visual motifs that serve as signs towards a relationship whose nature and meaning cannot be decoded and from which the reader is excluded. As such, the poems refuse to be translated wholly into either literary or clinical experience. They resist the lyric-reading expectation to 'understand'.

SOME KEY CRITICAL FEATURES: LOWERCASE

The consistent use of lowercase is something I have had to fight (often unsuccessfully) to defend in the culture of publication and review to which I professionally belong.

Although the poems often refer to my position within publication culture in a flippant way they nevertheless foreground what is, in terms of my creative practice, an important and continual negotiation of ethical responsibility, artistic integrity, and financial necessity. In doing so, the poems raise questions about where and by whom meaning is created, how it is decoded, and where it ultimately resides. That the textual elements of my creative submission serve to expose occasions of collision between poetic and therapeutic practice is central to my argument for an autoethnographic research methodology.

The removal of capitalisation, particularly of proper nouns, serves also to disrupt the traditional hierarchical relationship between the poem's speaking subject and the poem's nominal addressee in the favour of a more complex and complicit dialogic. The 'i' is in lowercase because the 'I' is not a uniquely stable, authoritative or privileged category. The boundaries between self and other are by no means solid or definitive, and the speaker slides in and out of various registers, voices or 'masks': the artist Mary Barnes, or Leonora Carrington's cat-headed anti-hero, Virginia Fur. The poems in the 'for the dead' sequence in particular acknowledge these slippages, as in this brief extract shows:

...i have been asked to consider what it means to wear my mary mask but there's no great mystery: i keep her in reserve for when my fran mask becomes intolerable to me. this is

often. i watch myself, quietly mystified, as the fran mask does the shopping, holds forth about franco moretti, and fails to secure funding yet again.⁸⁹

The figure of Mary Barnes can be read as both rhetorical and symptomatic device, standing for the 'mask', 'false self' or 'persona' that emerges following trauma, but also reflecting my continued intellectual unease surrounding lyric projects of address. Her presence troubles the terms of encounter between writer and reader, disrupting the implied hierarchical relationship and rejecting 'confessional' models of interaction. That she is 'mary' rather than 'Mary' draws her into the vast network of inter-textual inferences and allusions the poem makes use of, differentiating her from the real Mary Barnes, who occupies a fixed position in time and space.

The removal of capitalisation further serves to interrogate and problematize the relationship to time of both the speaker and the poem itself. In this way the poems refuse to be understood as samples of locatable, achievable text. With the exception of 'caoin' I maintain all punctuation that preserves the intended spoken rhythm of the poem, but remove that which would consign the 'letters' along with the thoughts and phrases they contain to discrete, objective parcels of time. The poem's temporal status is further complicated by slippages in register from the detached and academic to the aggressive, or the childlike, to patois and vernacular. The poems are conscious of their own temporal distortion, a feature which is communicated symptomatically as expressive of trauma's capacity to dislocate or loop time, as well as providing fuel for critical reflection.

The letter form itself enacts a type of fuzzy temporality. In her essay "'Living Two Tenses": The Intimate Archives of Sylvia Townsend Warner' Melanie Micir suggests that a body of letters might be privately written and received, but for published writers the 'epistolary pact' is also with posterity as

⁸⁹ Poem 8.

well as between the sender and the addressee. This is also true for epistolary poems, which exist at the intersection of private and public utterance.⁹⁰

The temporal divide between composition and reception, the separation of the time of writing from the time of reading, expands also into 'the necessary duality of archival time.'⁹¹ The letters, left by one generation are available to be interpreted and appropriated by future generations, incorporated into canons, solidarities; positing some kind of futurity. Micir writes of Warner's insistence upon 'thinking and feeling a then and there' rather than remaining stuck in the 'here and now' of the present'. The simultaneity of the 'here and now' and the 'then and there' mirror Warner's own description of herself as 'living in two tenses'.⁹² In *Theory of the Lyric* Jonathon Culler identifies this as the 'special now' of lyric articulation, which places us within the 'continuing present of apostrophic address'.⁹³ The 'now' for readers is a continuous, a poetic event that can repeat again with each activation. The use of lowercase is an attempt to communicate some of this destabilising temporal strangeness through the poems' typography.

The letters to 'bidy' – as ostensible biographical fragments that intersect and undercut the 'gentle reader' sequence – mobilize the therapeutic strategy for writing letters to a younger self, although in the context of the poems this strategy is devoid of the desired resolution.⁹⁴ The letters seem to offer

⁹⁰ Melanie Micir, "'Living in Two Tenses": On the Intimate Archives of Sylvia Townsend Warner' *Journal Modern Literature* Vol. 36, No.1 (Indiana University Press, Fall, 2012) pp.119-131. The notion of the 'epistolary pact' originated with Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (Ohio State University Press, 1982) p.89. Altman's notion of epistolarity is discussed in Volume 2 of this thesis.

⁹¹ Micir (p.127).

⁹² Micir (p.129).

⁹³ Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* (Harvard University Press, 2015) p.226. Also see Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (Cornel University, 1981)

access to specific childhood memories , but the use of 'biddy' – being the generic pejorative term for an Irish working-class or traveller girl – vanishes the specific-self inside the collective historical experience and destabilises how the reader encounters and interprets the text, resisting a biographical understanding of what follows.

The 'biddy' texts interrogate the notion of 'letters to self' as effective therapeutic tools, by exposing both the unreliability of traumatic memory, and the susceptibility of all memory to the political and cultural narratives that govern consciousness. Memory emerges from these poems as a space inscribed with the assumptions and experiences of a lifetime, not only personal but historical. The self becomes another ghost, another grieved subject, disappeared but present and ultimately unreachable.

⁹⁴ John F. Evans, *Transactional Writing: Letters that Heal*: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/write-yourself-well/201403/transactional-writing-letters-heal>

SOME KEY CRITICAL FEATURES: DENSITY

Although the consciousness presented through the texts conforms to the narrative and syntactic features of literatures of trauma as identified by Trauma Studies scholars such as Cathy Caruth, and Shoshana Felman, the structure of the text itself in both the 'gentle reader' and 'for the dead' sections of *narrowcasting* is solid and prosy. On the page these passages present as dense impacted blocks, recalling monumental masonry, or newspaper obituaries.⁹⁵

This not accidental, but has its analogue in consciousness and my own psychic experience of trauma as something impenetrable, as a barrier or blockade beyond which rational coherent thought recoils, and where my verbal incursions serve only as skirmishes, never quite naming or reaching the pain they attempt to describe. Language itself is implicated in this process: a compromise with lived experience that can only ever distort or elide that which it claims to represent. Language, then, is continually straining at itself, producing text in compulsive imperfect mimesis. The poems proliferate images of impediment and obstruction: graffitied walls, slamming doors, boarded up windows, trussed bodied, gagged mouths, blinded eyes, ramparts and barricades, prison bars. In 'caoin' in particular these varied textual obstructions are explicitly linked to their counterparts in public space, in the securitized and politically divided landscape of West Belfast, connecting violence inflicted upon communities and spaces to that enacted through and inflicted upon the text.

The 'caoin' sequence is the first sequence that begins to break down or 'rupture' the monolithic integrity of the text, suggesting that in moments of the most intense pressure, where language

⁹⁵ Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub M.D, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (Routledge, 2002) p.171.

beings to break down, are to be found flashes and fragments of resistance, a radically repurposed speech.

SOME KEY CRITICAL FEATURES: PROTEST

The political landscape of Northern Ireland, but also that of various British protest cohorts is woven into the textual fabric of *narrowcasting*. In part this reflects my own lived experience as a member of what is often referred to as The Protest Movement, this despite its not being one homogenous entity at all, but a collection of disparate, uneasily intersecting groups. The poems both attend to and pass ironic comment upon the preoccupations of these groups and my own place within them:

...i'll march, for all the good that does. i mean, i'll march for all the good. what's left?
processional dissidence. usurping a function of government. *tory scum, here we come*. black
bloc lock to the rescue! we muster this, a generation doomed and countered. there's *force*,
then there's *coercion*...⁹⁶

This excerpt from the 'gentle reader' sequence of *narrowcasting* uses the poem to reflect on the way language is mobilized by protest, and what is lost amidst the rhetorics of popular left-wing demonstrations, its chants, banners and slogans.

Elsewhere, in 'caoin', the texts use snatches of song and sectarian graffiti to relate political violence to textual violence. In both instances the unrealised aims and objectives of protest are aligned with the unrealised aims and objectives of language. The poems contest that meaningful 'victory' is impossible because meaningful communication is impossible through the ready-made language of the left-wing protest cohorts to which I belong. The poems address my own complicity in the use of this language, and my own lack of attention to its slippages and failures.

⁹⁶ Poem 11.

SOME FEATURES OF THE TEXT – HALTING SITES

Halting sites, in the administrative language of local government are facilities provided and maintained by the local authorities for the accommodation of Traveller communities. They are peripheral and contested spaces, their placement often an occasion for tension within the wider, sedentary community. Halting sites are not exactly permanent settlements, they're places of formal predetermined pause; they represent an attempt by settled authorities to both accommodate and routinize the unpredictable nomadism of Travellers; they are spaces of compromise and concession, a kind of spatial parlay between two worlds.

I chose this title for this particular collection of poems because the texts are also 'halting sites': poem as a place of formal pause within the maelstrom and anarchy of grieving, where language both facilitates and circumscribes expression within its structural limits, poem as a complicated compromise between two opposing rhetorics, poem as a space of suspense, a peripheral space, a contested site, a liminal one.

'Halting' too as in the limping, stuttering progress I make in tracking Martyn, both through the 'official' records, and through the traces of my own traumatic memory. Traumatic memory is the ultimate halting site: maimed, faltering and hesitant, stopping and starting. Trauma is always approaching and repeating itself, it is never fully realised, it never truly 'arrives'.

The opening sequence of 'halting sites' uses text from a variety of sources, text that becomes riven – literally – infiltrated and compromised by both lyric language, and by fragments of personal and traumatic memory. The poems make use of journal articles, official reports, and statistical documents

all of which relate in some way to the administration of Traveller communities.⁹⁷ I'm working with texts that – consciously or unconsciously – instrumentalize and objectify persons; that disappear individuals inside the biopolitical systems that contain them. I am also working with texts that attempt *not* to re-inscribe this hierarchical relationship to their subjects, but to allow for individual voices to emerge. These moments of emergence initiate in me a psychic chain-reaction of empathy, identification, and grief. These are moments of understanding, where I see through the generalising haze of the documents to the specific incidents and experiences that shaped us both. This produces a poetics of disruption or eruption; a collision and a layering of registers and affective intensities.

'halting sites' is a species of montage too, after Benjamin, a kind of 'appropriation poem-making', recycling, repurposing and juxtaposing text to retune attention and to trouble readerly reliance upon linear historical and authoritative cultural narratives as ways of decoding text and interpreting experience.⁹⁸

The poems in the 'nor home is home' sequence take this one step further: they are a jumble of literary, historical and personal allusions, where fragments of traumatic memory are spliced with episodes from or references to ancient Irish or Traveller history; what occurs is a defamiliarisation with the accepted public 'story' of sectarian violence in Ireland, and Traveller exclusion from that story. The poem deliberately and forcefully rejects the phrase 'The Troubles' as both a euphemistic abdication of reality, and as a discrete bounded parcel of time. Rather, the poem attests to political violence in Ireland as something porous and continuous, inseparable in cause and effect from subjective memory and personal trauma.

⁹⁷ See Other Materials.

⁹⁸ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Harvard University Press, 1996) p.406.

Although the footnotes in 'jagged little pilot' in particular gesture towards an 'explanation' of the complex network of literary and historical allusions, they do not reconcile these disparate references within the very specific context of their creation. I am attempting to invoke the looping, repetitive time of trauma, with its forced recursive witnessing to and of the initiating experience. The text acts as an incarnation of traumatised perception, and a deliberate rejection of the narrative demands of witnessing.⁹⁹ The poem uses the footnotes to shroud or shore up the silence at the dark, inarticulate heart of traumatic memory.¹⁰⁰ Any attempt to intelligently represent traumatic experience through language will ultimately fail, thus any attempt to systematize, interpret, collect or catalogue the records of those experiences will always be, at best, partial, and at worst unethical.

Ultimately, what the text asserts is trauma's right to speak in its own voice, and that in privileging traditional forms of literary and historical understanding we sacrifice the knowledge uniquely exposed by resistance, disorientation, and contingency.

⁹⁹ Donna McCormack, *Postcolonial Narratives and the Ethics of Witnessing* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2014) pp.19-20.

¹⁰⁰ Lauren Berlant 'Trauma and Ineloquence' *Cultural Values* 5 (2001) p.41.

